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Comments and Letters

Televised Violence and Viewers' Perceptions of Reality: A reply to Criticisms of Some British Research

THE GERBNER GROUP (*POQ* 43:123–24) have raised some doubts about work which did not substantiate their research claims about television effects. Items to answer include the following:

One: publication of the offending results (*POQ* 42:315–21) was in undue haste without checking methodological details. But Wober's request for collaborative support, at the 1976 Conference of the IAMCR in Leicester, was signed with the expectation of being sent full operational instructions. A subsequent letter elicited an offprint of an article already read, a list of survey questions, but no technical report.

Two: British programing is not like American; and the assessment of the violence which may be seen by British viewers was not obtained from pairs of trained coders. However, the assessment was acceptable editorially elsewhere;[1] Himmelweit et al. have shown that ordinary people agree well on what is violent and what is not.[2] Trained coder assessment of output did not lie behind one of the strongest of the claimed effects,[3] with responses to "Most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man." Belson[4] and others have suggested that even the British proportion of portrayed violence is socially potent; and Gerbner and Gross's claims[5] that "ritualized displays of any violence . . . may cultivate

[1] J. M. Wober, "Who views violence in Britain?" Journal of Communication 28 (1978):172–75.

[2] H. T. Himmelweit, B. Swift, and M. J. Biberian, "The audience as critic: an approach to the study of entertainment," in P. Tannenbaum (ed.), Entertainment Functions of Television (New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1978).

[3] G. Gerbner, L. Gross, M. Jackson-Beek, S. Jeffries-Fox, and N. Signorielli, "Cultural indicators: violence profile no. 9." Journal of Communication 28 (1978).

[4] W. A. Belson, Television Violence and the Adolescent Boy (Farnborough: Saxon House, 1978).

[5] G. Gerbner and L. Gross, "Living with television: the violence profile." Journal of Communication 26 (1976):173–99.

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exaggerated assumptions about the extent of threat and danger in the world'' and ''television may function as the established religion of the industrial order'' suggest that the effects are robust, so they may reasonably be expected to be manifest, even with different diagnostic methods.

Three: The notion that ''we say watching television makes people 'paranoid about violence' '' is said to involve a fundamental misunderstanding. The overall approach looks at ''viewers' conceptions of many aspects of social reality . . . .'' Of these aspects, violence and paranoid perception (see above) are clearly a claimed effect. To explore further, our 1977 nationwide survey on Attitudes to Broadcasting asked people to estimate the percentage of nonsmokers in the population. Heavy viewers (four-plus hours claimed daily, who are likely to see more tobacco ads and actors smoking) guessed 40 percent; light viewers (two hours or less, definitions following Gerbner throughout) guessed 43 percent, an insignificant difference also confounded by a larger social class effect. Heavy viewers (who are likely to see more holiday ads and travelogue programs) guessed there were 34 percent who holidayed abroad; light viewers guessed 28 percent (no effect with social class). This is the only possible ''cultivation effect'' we have so far found.

Four: The N of the Diary sample was 200, of whom ''tops and tails'' were examined in my *POQ* article. The national interview sample was indeed divided (as explained on p. 319, *op. cit.*) to counter the possibility present in Gerbner's methods that a response set could affect both the global (nondiary) measures of weight of viewing and the endorsement of pro-thesis ''agree'' statements. The resulting N of 556 lost 298 medium weight viewers, leaving the 258 ($df = N - 2$) light and heavy viewers whose security scale[6] scores were examined in Table 2.

As well as response set, an obvious underlying possibility unstudied in Gerbner's early work is that objective levels of violence may keep people indoors and raise their volume of TV viewing, as well as their estimates of violent and of law-enforcement phenomena. In Northern Ireland in 1976 (averaging 27 weeks' figures from JICTAR—the industry's measurement consortium) homes viewed television for 5 hours and 19 minutes, against a national average in the same weeks of 5

[6] Questions were:

How unsafe do you feel? During the next year, how likely is it that you will be robbed? (Extremely/very/fairly/not very/not at all likely)

How trustworthy do you think people are? Out of 10 people chosen at random, how many do you think you could trust? (any number, 0–10)

hours and 4 minutes.[7] In January 1978 IBA postal surveys in Northern Ireland and Yorkshire measured Perceived Personal Risk (PPR, four questions) and Reality Shift (the tendency to agree with TV portrayed, rather than with actual fact about law enforcement and violent crime incidence, RS, three questions). Weight of viewing was measured by the superior method of counting items endorsed in a week's diary. In Yorkshire, viewing weight failed to relate significantly to PPR or RS; in Northern Ireland it corrected significantly to RS, but in the urban subsample negatively to PPR and in the rural subsample insignificantly to PPR. Reality Shift and Perceived Personal Risk appear therefore to be empirically as well as conceptually distinct; for the latter, it is still not easy to confirm links with weight of viewing.

Supporting the above, Doob and Macdonald[8] found in Toronto that "there is essentially no relationship between media usage and fear of crime when the effect of 'neighbourhood' is removed." Finally, Piepe et al.[9] reported from Portsmouth "it is clear that the perception of their area as more violent by council tenants is environmental and unrelated to their heavier television viewing." The original thesis has therefore not yet found independent confirmation.

J. M. WOBER
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[7] JICTAR is the Joint Industry Committee for Television Advertising Research; its 2,600 nationwide set-metered panel includes a subsample of 100 in Northern Ireland. The heavier viewing was performed in spite of Independent Television broadcasting 4 percent fewer hours of total output over the year in Northern Ireland than for the nation.

[8] A. N. Doob and G. E. Macdonald, "Television viewing and the fear of victimization: is the relationship causal?" Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (in press).

[9] A. Piepe, J. Crouch, and M. Emerson, "Violence and television." New Society 41 (1978):336–38.