TELEVISION'S INFLUENCE ON VALUES AND BEHAVIOR

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Considerable attention has been given in recent years to the potential impact of violence in television programming on viewers' behavior. Research into such issues is extremely complex. In this lesson, the author presents some of the difficulties inherent in carrying out such evaluations. He describes television as a total cultural system that creates a broad, symbolic world and which, to be genuinely understood, must be seen in a global manner. About three-quarters of all leading television characters are male, middle- or upper-class, and in the prime of life. Symbolic independence offers freedom uninhibited by real-life considerations. Females, by and large, are portrayed as sexual, married, or intending to marry.

Violence is indeed a key role in this medium, conveying messages that transcend the concrete issue of physical violence and pertain to the realities and subtleties of social norms, power struggles, and the risks of living. The most common victims of violence are male children, women, and nonwhites. An analysis of television viewers suggests that children are more profoundly influenced by viewing than adults, and that the world readily becomes a place in which others cannot be trusted and are envisioned to be motivated primarily by unrestrained self-interest. The net subjective result is commonly fear.

The practicing psychiatrist is quite familiar with the fact that a thorough understanding of his patients' conflicts, personalities, and life situations requires knowledge of the culture in which they live and both the constructive and destructive influences of that culture. The world of television is an important aspect of such an evaluation.

Television's Influence on Values and Behavior

Introduction

Television is with us too much to be able to see it clearly. It is part of a series of technological innovations that have changed the way we live. Discussion about its effects is the current version of the great popular cultural debate that has raged since the spread of cheap print aroused apprehension of passivity, immorality, and violence, especially on the part of children and the lower classes—who, presumably, have always been more "corruptible."

With that background, it has been difficult to sort out scapegoating and self-serving arguments from an objective determination of TV's independent contribution to the cultivation of values and behavior. In over 10 years of concentrated research on television's content and effects, my associates and I have come to the conclusion that the difficulties stem from widespread misconceptions about the nature of television itself, about research appropriate to that medium, and about the process of learning from its stories.

What is Television?

Television comes to us as a combination of radio, movies, the pulps, games, circuses, comics and cartoons, and a dash of journalism, but it is none of these. **It is the first mass-produced, organically composed symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which they will live from cradle to grave.** No other medium or institution since preindustrial religion has had a comparable influence on what people of a tribe, community, or nation have learned, thought, or done in common. No emperor or pope could ever dream of having a pulpit in every home with an inexhaustible supply of charismatic ministers delivering messages—and audiences—every day.

Over four million hours of programming a year are discharged into the mainstream of common consciousness to fill the time and attention of about 100 million people of all types and ages on a typical evening. The TV set is on in the average American home almost seven hours each day. By the time children reach school age they will have spent more time with television than they would in a college classroom.

Television demands no mobility, literacy, or concentrated attention. Its repetitive patterns come into the home and show, as well as tell, about people and society. Presidents, policemen, surgical operating rooms, courtrooms, spies, and celebrities are familiar parts of a selective and synthetic world that most people know most about. **Television is a total cultural system (as was tribal religion) with its own art, science, statecraft, legendry, geography, demography, character types, and action structure.** TV mythology encapsulates those selected features of the larger media culture that lend themselves best to its basic sales and socializing functions. Television now occupies the symbolic life of the young, the less educated, and the formerly isolated or deprived people who have never before been plugged into a central cultural system that reaches from the penthouse to the ghetto.

The television audience is not only the most heterogeneous public ever assembled but also the most nonselective. Most viewers watch by the clock and not by the program. Viewing is a ritual governed by styles of life and time. Different kinds of programs serve the same basic formula designed to assemble viewers and sell to them at the lowest cost. The classifications of the print media with their relatively sharp differentiation between news, drama, documentary, etc., do not apply as much to television. **Heavy viewers watch more of everything. Different time and program segments complement and reinforce each other as they present aspects of the same symbolic world.**

There is little age-grading, regional, or even ethnic separation of the symbolic materials that socialize members of an otherwise heterogeneous community into the common culture. Most children control their own (if not the whole family's) sets and watch mostly adult programs and problems. Minority groups see their own image shaped by the dominant interests of the larger culture. Although broadcasting is the cultural arm of private business and industry, it is an offically licensed enterprise operating in the public domain. Television thus becomes an organ of governance as well as of acculturation, relating to the state as only the church did in ancient times. Its nearly universal and ritualistic use fits the repetitive patterns

of its progamming well. Most people watch television as they used to attend church, except that they watch television more religiously.

The World of Television

Our annual monitoring of network drama shows a remarkably consistent pattern, despite changes in program titles, forms, and styles. Many times a day, seven days a week, the dramatic pattern defines situations and cultivates premises about society, people, and issues. Casting the symbolic world thus has a meaning of its own. The lion's share of representation goes to the types that dominate the social order. **About three-quarters of all leading characters are male, American, middle- and upper-class, and in the prime of life. Symbolic independence requires freedom relatively uninhibited by real-life constraints. Less fully represented are those lower in the domestic and global power hierarchy and characters involved in familiar social contexts, human dependencies, and other situations that impose the real-life burdens of human relationships and obligations upon freewheeling activity.**

Women typically represent romantic or family interest, close human contact, and love. Males can act in nearly any role, but rare is the female part that does not involve at least the suggestion of sex. While only one in three male leads is shown as having ever been married or intending to marry, two of every three females are married or expect to marry in the story. Female "specialties" limit the proportion of TV's women to about one-fourth of the total population.

Nearly half of all females are concentrated in the most sexually eligible young adult population, to which only one-fifth of males are assigned; women are also disproportionately represented among the very young and old. Children, adolescents, and old people together account for less than 15% of the total fictional population.

Approximately five in 10 characters can be unambiguously identified as gainfully employed. Of these, three are **proprietors, managers, and professionals.** The fourth comes from **the ranks of labor**—including all those employed in factories, farms, offices, shops, stores, mining, transportation, service stations, restaurants, and households, and those working in unskilled, skilled, clerical, sales, and domestic service capacities. The fifth serves to **enforce the law or preserve the peace** on behalf of public or private clients.

Types of activity—paid and unpaid—also reflect dramatic and social purposes. Six in 10 characters are engaged in discernible occupational activity. The first group represents **the world of legitimate private business,** industry, agriculture, finance, etc. The second group is engaged in **activity related to art, science, religion, health, education, and welfare,** as professionals, amateurs, patients, students, or clients. The third makes up **the forces of official or semiofficial authority and the army of criminals, outlaws, spies, and other enemies arrayed against them.** One in every four leading characters acts out a drama of some sort of transgression and its suppression at home or abroad.

Violence plays a key role in such a world. It is the simplest and cheapest dramatic means available to demonstrate the rules of the game of power. **In real life much violence is subtle, slow, circumstantial, invisible, even impersonal.** Encounters with physical violence in real life are rare, more sickening than thrilling. But **in the symbolic world, overt physical action makes dramatically visible that which in the real world is usually hidden.** Symbolic violence, as any show of force, typically does the job of real violence more cheaply and, of course, entertainingly.

Research on Television

What do viewers learn from the world of television? The question of the influence of broad acculturation on values and behavior patterns is different from the usual applied research question about individual messages, campaigns, programs, or genres. Traditional procedures of media-effects research must be reconceptualized and modified for television; that is what we do in our long-range research project called Cultural Indicators.*

First, we cannot presume consequences, as the conventional research paradigm tends to do, without the prior investigation of content. Nor can the content be limited to isolated elements (e.g., news, commericals, or specific programs) taken out of the total context, or to individual viewer selections. The "world" of television is an aggregate system of stories and images. **Only a systemwide analysis of messages**

*Dr. Gerbner is coprincipal investigator (with Dr. Larry Gross) in a long-range study of television effects. The project is supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, the American Medical Association, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, HEW's Administration on Aging, and other foundations.

can reveal the symbolic world which structures common assumptions and definitions for the generations born into it and provides bases for interaction (though not necessarily of agreement) among large and heterogeneous communities. The system as a whole plays a major role in setting the agenda of issues to agree or disagree about; it shapes the most pervasive norms and cultivates the dominant perspectives of society.

Another conventional research assumption is that the experiment is the most powerful method, and that change (in attitudes, opinions, likes/dislikes, etc., toward or conveyed by "variable X") is the most significant outcome to measure. In the ideal experiment, you expose a group to X and assess salient aspects of the state of the receivers before and after exposure, comparing the change, if any, to data obtained from a control group (identical in all relevant ways to the experimental group) who have not received X. No change or no difference means no effect.

When X is television, however, we must turn this paradigm around: **Stability (or even resistance to change) may be a significant outcome of the sum total of the play of many variables.** If nearly everyone "lives" to some extent in the world of television, clearly we cannot find unexposed groups who would be identical in all important respects to the viewers. We cannot isolate television from the mainstream of modern culture because it is the mainstream. We cannot look for change as the most significant accomplishment of the chief arm of established culture if its main social function is to maintain, reinforce, and exploit rather than to undermine prevalent conceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. On the contrary, the relative ineffectiveness of isolated campaigns to change attitudes may itself be testimony to the power of mainstream communications.

Neither can we assume that TV cultivates conceptions easily distinguishable from those of other major entertainment media. (But we cannot emphasize too strongly the historically novel role of television in standardizing and sharing with all as the common norm what had before been more parochial, local, and selective cultural patterns.) We assume, therefore, that TV's standardizing and legitimizing influence comes largely from its ability to streamline, amplify, ritualize, and spread the conventional capsules of mass-produced information and entertainment into hitherto isolated or protected subcultures, homes, and nooks and crannies of the land.

Much of the research on media violence, for example, has focused on the observation and measurement of behavior which occurs after a viewer has seen a particular program or even isolated scenes from programs. All such studies, no matter how clean the design and clear the results, are of limited value because they ignore a fundamental fact: The world of TV drama consists of a complex and integrated system of characters, events, actions, and relationships whose effects cannot be measured with regard to any single element or program seen in isolation.

The final difficulty with applying conventional media-research techniques to the study of television is that most traditional methods relate to bits of information rather than to total symbol systems composed largely of stories. Storytelling shows how things work. Once the invisible dynamics of life are grasped through fiction and drama, the lessons can be applied to various circumstances and perspectives of real life.

Therefore, in contrast to the more usual statement of the problem, we do not believe that the only critical correlate of television violence is to be found in the stimulation of occasional individual aggression. The consequences of living in a symbolic world ruled largely by violence may be much more far-reaching. **TV violence is a dramatic demonstration of power which communicates much about social norms and relationships, goals and means, winners and losers, and the risks of life and the price for transgressions of society's rules.** Violence-laden drama shows who gets away with what, when, why, how, and against whom. "Real world" victims as well as those who are violent may have to learn their roles. **Fear**—that historic instrument of social control—**may be an even more critical residue of a show of violence than aggression.** Expectation of violence, or passivity in the face of injustice, may be consequences of even greater social concern.

The Lessons of Television

To find out what viewers in fact learn from television, we search for those assumptions about "facts" of life and society that TV tends to cultivate among its more faithful viewers. That search requires **two different but related methods of research.**

The first step is **the periodic analysis of large and representative aggregates of television output (rather than individual segments) as the system of messages to which total communities are exposed.** The purpose of message-system analysis is to establish the composi-

tion and structure of the symbolic world. **The second step is to determine what, if anything, viewers absorb from living in that world.** Here we turn the findings of message-system analysis about the fantasy land of television into questions about social reality. To each of these questions there is a "television answer," which is like the way things appear in the world of television, and another answer which is biased in the opposite direction, closer to the way things are in the observable world. We ask these questions of samples of adults and children. All responses are related to television exposure, other media habits, and demographic characteristics. We then compare the response of light and heavy viewers, controlling for sex, age, education, and other characteristics. The margin of heavy viewers over light viewers giving the "television answers" within and across groups is the "cultivation differential" indicating conceptions about social reality that viewing tends to cultivate.

The findings themselves add up to a complex and dynamic picture. Viewers tend to learn about "facts" outside their own experience and about values and standards with which to interpret their experience. We are accumulating results and studying patterns in such areas as sex and age role socialization, family life, law and politics, occupational choices, health and medicine. The independent contribution of television to the cultivation of assumptions can best be seen in those aspects in which TV presents a pattern different from or more extreme than other sources. One such area is, of course, violence.

The 10-year average of network dramatic violence (defined as the overt expression of physical force to hurt or kill) has been almost eight incidents per hour, involving more than half of all characters—but not equally. Compared to their ability to inflict violence within each group, **white males had the lowest ratio of victimization. The burden of higher risks of victimization fell on male children; young, unmarried, lower class, and older women; and nonwhites.**

Although we do not yet know TV's contribution to the unequal structures of power and risk reflected in its dramatic world, **the results of our adult and child surveys show consistent learning and the particular vulnerability of children to television. These results also confirm that violence-laden television not only cultivates aggressive tendencies in a minority but, perhaps more importantly, generates a pervasive and exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust. Heavy viewers revealed a significantly higher sense of personal risk and suspicion than did light viewers in the same demographic groups, exposed to the same real risks of life.**

For example, we asked, "What are your chances of being involved in some kind of violence during any given week? About one in 10? Or about one in 100?" Heavy viewers (watching four or more hours a day) on every sample we have used gave the higher figure in significantly greater numbers than did light viewers (watching two hours or less a day).

The analysis shows a significant tendency for heavy viewers to overestimate the prevalence of violence, compared to that exhibited by light viewers. The analysis also demonstrates that **television's effects cannot be accounted for in terms of the major demographic variables of age, sex, education, or even, in the case of our children's sample, I. Q. The effects are consistent and robust for both children and adults** across a range of undoubtedly powerful control comparisons.

Figure 1 illustrates the patterns of responses to what we have called "mean world" questions. The percentages of "television answers" given by light, medium, and heavy viewers (in the case of children, viewing levels did not permit us to identify heavy viewers in our usual terms) clearly indicate patterns of association between viewing and conceptions of social reality.

Essentially, those who were heavy television viewers tended to answer affirmatively to the question: "Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you, given a chance?," and children seemed more influenced than adults. Those who were moderate to heavy viewers revealed a higher level of general distrust of others and, again with children being predominant, felt that people, by and large, were just looking out for themselves.

Cultural factors contribute substantially to shaping behavior. They are also critical to the ability of individuals and groups to cope with the demands and stresses of life. If, as it seems, the net effect of television viewing is to increase the level of fear, to encourage a guardedness and suspiciousness toward others, and to present a world in which people are basically self-seeking, its impact cannot be ignored by the physician or psychiatrist whose main concern is to help patients discover values and patterns of behavior that are often in striking contrast to such a world.

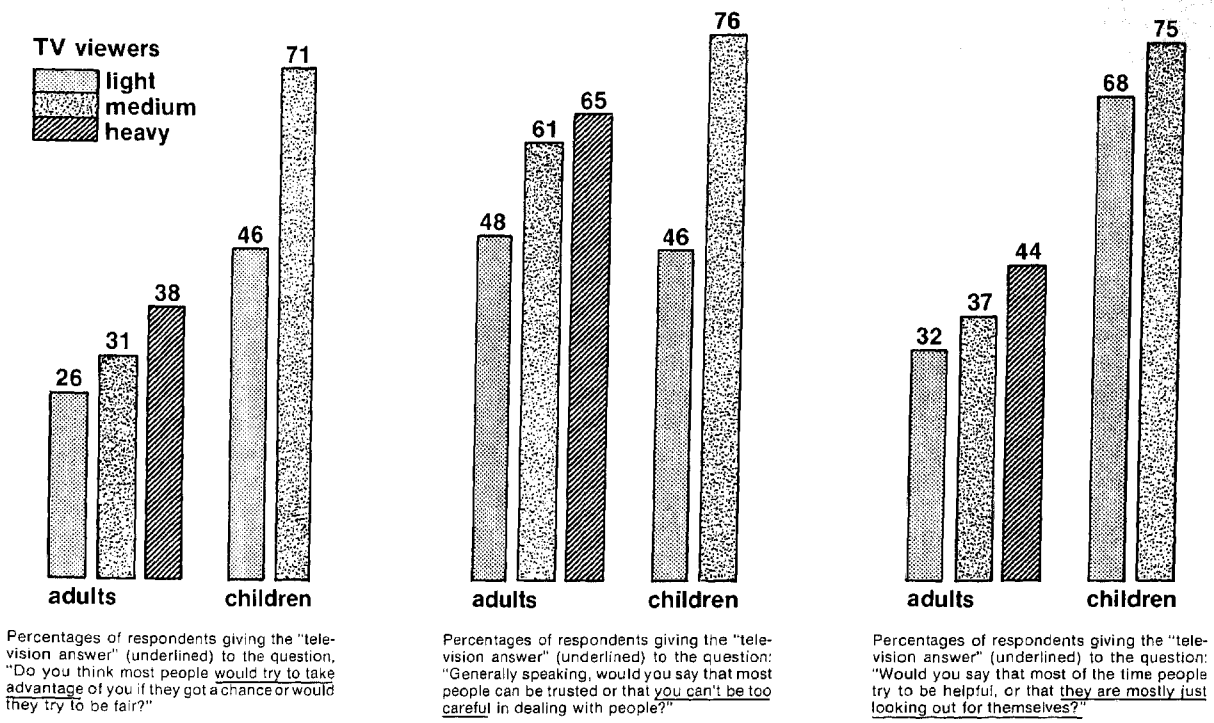

Figure 1. Percentages of adults and children giving "television answers" to three "mean world" questions.

STUDY GUIDE

1. Comstock, G.: "Types of Portrayal and Aggressive Behavior" and other studies in a symposium on television effects in J. Comm., Summer 1977.

2. Gerbner, G.: "Communication and Social Environment," Sci. Am., September 1972.

3. Gerbner, G., and Gross, L.: "The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer," Psych. Today, April 1976.

4. Gerbner, G., and Gross, L.: "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," J. Comm., Spring 1976.

5. Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Eleey, M. F., Jackson-Beeck, M., Jeffries-Fox, S., and Signorielli, N.: "TV Violence Profile No. 8: The Highlights," J. Comm., Spring 1977.

6. Siegel, A. A.: "Communicating with the Next Generation"; Comstock, G.: "The Evidence So Far"; and other articles in a symposium on the effects of television on children and adolescents in J. Comm., Autumn 1975.

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POST-STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Which of the following statements about the content of television programming is not correct?
   - Ⓐ Three-quarters of all leading characters are female
   - Ⓑ The vast majority of leading characters are middle- and upper-class and in the prime of life
   - Ⓒ The behavior of leading television characters is unhampered, as a rule, by realistic life constraints
   - Ⓓ The lower socioeconomic groups and the elderly are seldom portrayed in television entertainment
   - Ⓔ Three-quarters of all leading characters are male

2. In evaluating the impact of television on behavior, it is usually best to:
   - Ⓐ Study the impact of a particular program on the individual's immediate emotional responses
   - Ⓑ Study the impact of a particular kind of behavior, such as violence, on a particular type of response, namely violence
   - Ⓒ Consider a systemwide analysis of messages that reveal the symbolic world, which structures common assumptions and definitions, and approach the evaluation of impact in a broad behavioral way
   - Ⓓ Dismiss the research problem as unsolvable because of too many variables
   - Ⓔ None of the above

3. The observed incidence of violence on television, defined as overt expression of physical force to hurt or kill, is:
   - Ⓐ One incident per hour involving 10% of characters
   - Ⓑ Three incidents per hour involving 20% of characters
   - Ⓒ Five incidents per hour involving 40% of characters
   - Ⓓ Eight incidents per hour involving over 50% of characters
   - Ⓔ 15 incidents per hour involving over 50% of characters

4. On television, women are usually portrayed as:
   - Ⓐ Sexual
   - Ⓑ Romantic
   - Ⓒ Involved in close human contact, including love
   - Ⓓ Married or intending to marry
   - Ⓔ All of the above

5. Current studies indicate that the strongest influence of television is on children and that the effect of the global system that includes so much violence is:
   - Ⓐ To encourage violent acts
   - Ⓑ To encourage criminal activities
   - Ⓒ To create a pervasive sense of fear and mistrust
   - Ⓓ To discourage television viewing
   - Ⓔ None of the above

QUESTIONS ON PREVIOUS TOPICS

6. Which of the following statements is not correct?
   - Ⓐ The hypnotic state encompasses only certain portions of ego, while a greater or lesser portion of the ego remains outside the hypnotized part
   - Ⓑ Subjects who have been age-regressed to infantile age levels under hypnosis can still understand and respond to adult verbal communication
   - Ⓒ Most hypnotized subjects have a total amnesia concerning their experience
   - Ⓓ During hypnosis, the locus of control is more in the subject than in the hypnotist
   - Ⓔ The use of sensory imagery is a basic tool in hypnosis

7. Epidemiological studies reveal that:
   - Ⓐ Over the years a shift has occurred, with psychopathological changes, once more common among males, now being more apparent among females
   - Ⓑ Psychopathological findings are no more common among males than females and never were
   - Ⓒ In recent years, whereas psychopathological states were more common among females, they have increased markedly among males
   - Ⓓ The changing roles for women and their adaptation to these changes have probably not influenced the prevalence rates for psychiatric disorders
   - Ⓔ None of the above

8. Involuntary hospitalization is more common among:
   - Ⓐ Females
   - Ⓑ Nonwhites
   - Ⓒ Older patients
   - Ⓓ Adolescents
   - Ⓔ None of the above

PRE-STUDY QUESTIONS

9. The fundamental parameters of vocal behavior include:
   - Ⓐ Respiration
   - Ⓑ Range
   - Ⓒ Resonance
   - Ⓓ Rhythm
   - Ⓔ All of the above

10. Animal experimentation is commonly used as a model for behavioral research. Which of the following statements is not correct?
    - Ⓐ There should be a reasonable similarity between the animals' behavior and the human behavior under study
    - Ⓑ The situation used to trigger abnormal behavior in animals should reasonably parallel human experience
    - Ⓒ The animal model and the human condition should have neurobiolgoical traits in common
    - Ⓓ Behavioral or biological events established in animal research can be transposed to human conditions without reservations
    - Ⓔ None of the above

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