Mirror of American Life

A Courses by Newspaper Reader

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Courses by Newspaper
is a project of
University Extension,
University of California,
San Diego

Funded by
The National Endowment
for the Humanities

Publisher's Inc.
Del Mar, California

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A few years ago a deranged sniper on top of a University of Texas tower was shooting down forty-six people with a high-powered rifle. A young nun on a lower floor chanced to look out a window and saw what was happening, and at first looked upon the spectacle with an almost passive, lackadaisical response before it occurred to her, "My God, this is not television; those are real people getting shot out there."

Do the media of popular culture inure us to real violence? Is the social cost of television programs like "Baretta" or "Starsky & Hutch" too high? During the past year both the American Medical Association and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers stated in unequivocal terms that they wanted a cleansing of violence from television. The A.M.A. gave $25,000 to Nicholas Johnson's vigorous National Citizens Committee for Broadcasting to partially support a study on TV violence. When the study's findings were reported, the A.M.A. then asked ten of TV's biggest advertisers to withdraw their commercials from the most violent programs.

Even though two firms, Eastman Kodak and General Motors, gave in to the various pressures and withdrew their advertising from violent shows, one shouldn't expect a quick, drastic change in television's prevailing patterns.

In their noted study of television's heavy viewer, Drs. Gerbner and Gross report that by mobilizing fear, the medium has replaced the church as the toughest means of social control. As they see it, the effects of TV's symbolic world extend much further than whether its violence leads viewers to aggressive acts.

The Scary World of TV's Heavy Viewer

George Gerbner
Larry Gross

Many critics worry about violence on television, most out of fear that it stimulates viewers to violent or aggressive acts. Our research, however, indicates that the consequences of experiencing TV's symbolic world of violence may be much more far-reaching.

We feel that television dramatically demonstrates the power of authority in our society, and the risks involved in breaking society's rules. Violence-filled programs show who gets away with what, and against whom. It teaches the role of victim, and the acceptance of violence as a social reality we must learn to live with—or flee from.

We have found that people who watch a lot of TV see the real world as more dangerous and frightening than those who watch very little. Heavy viewers are less trustful of their fellow citizens, and more fearful of the real world.

Since most TV "action-adventure" dramas occur in urban settings, the fear they inspire may contribute to the current flight

of the middle class from our cities. The fear may also bring increasing demands for police protection, and election of law-and-order politicians.

Those who doubt TV's influence might consider the impact of the automobile on American society. When the automobile burst upon the dusty highways about the turn of the century, most Americans saw it as a horseless carriage, not as a prime mover of a new way of life. Similarly, those of us who grew up before television tend to think of it as just another medium in a series of 20th-century mass-communications systems, such as movies and radio. But television is not just another medium.

TV: The Universal Curriculum

If you were born before 1950, television came into your life after your formative years. Even if you are now a TV addict, it will be difficult for you to comprehend the transformations it has wrought. For example, imagine spending six hours a day at the local movie house when you were 12 years old. No parent would have permitted it. Yet, in our sample of children, nearly half the 12-year-olds watch an average of six or more hours of television per day. For many of them the habit continues into adulthood. On the basis of our surveys, we estimate that about one-third of all American adults watch an average of four or more hours of television per day.

Television is different from all other media. From cradle to grave it penetrates nearly every home in the land. Unlike newspapers and magazines, television does not require literacy. Unlike the movies, it runs continuously, and once purchased, costs almost nothing. Unlike radio, it can show as well as tell. Unlike the theater or movies, it does not require leaving your home. With virtually unlimited access, television both precedes literacy and, increasingly, preempts it.

Never before have such large and varied publics—from the nursery to the nursing home, from ghetto tenement to penthouse—shared so much of the same cultural system of messages and images, and the assumptions embedded in them. Television offers a universal curriculum that everyone can learn.

"With virtually unlimited access, television both precedes literacy and, increasingly, preempts it."

Imagine a hermit who lives in a cave linked to the outside world by a television set that functioned only during prime time. His knowledge of the world would be built exclusively out of the images and facts he could glean from the fictional events, persons, objects and places that appear on TV. His expectations and judgments about the ways of the world would follow the conventions of TV programs, with their predictable plots and outcomes. His view of human nature would be shaped by the shallow psychology of TV characters.

TV Hermits

While none of us is solely dependent upon television for our view of the world, neither have many of us had the opportunity to observe the reality of police stations, courtrooms, corporate board rooms, or hospital operating rooms. Although critics complain about the stereotyped characters and plots of TV dramas, many viewers look on them as representative of the real world. Anyone who questions that assertion should read the 250,000 letters, most containing requests for medical advice, sent by viewers to "Marcus Welby, M.D." during the first five years of his practice on TV.

If adults can be so accepting of the reality of television, imagine its effect on children.

By the time the average American child reaches public school, he has already spent several years in an electronic nursery school. At the age of 10 the average youngster spends more hours a week in front of the TV screen than in the classroom. Given continuous exposure to the world of TV, it's not surprising that the children we tested seemed to be more strongly influenced by TV than were the adults.

At the other end of the life cycle, television becomes the steady and often the only companion of the elderly. As failing eyesight makes reading difficult, and getting around becomes a problem, the inhabitants at many nursing homes and retirement communities pass much of the day in the TV room, where the action of fictional drama helps make up for the inaction of their lives.

To learn what they and other Americans have been watching we have been studying the facts of life in the world of evening network television drama—what that world looks like, what happens in it, who lives in it, and who does what to whom in it. We have explored this world by analyzing the content of the situation comedies, dramatic series, and movies that appear in prime time, between 8 and 11 P.M.

The Simple World of TV Plots

Night after night, week after week, stock characters and dramatic patterns convey supposed truths about people, power and issues. About three-fourths of all leading characters on prime-time network TV are male, mostly single, middle- and upper-class white Americans in their 20s or 30s. Most of the women represent romantic or family interests. While only one out of every three male leads intends to or has ever been married, two out of every three female leads are either married, expected to marry, or involved in some romantic relationship.

Unlike the real world, where personalities are complex, motives unclear, and outcomes ambiguous, television presents a world of clarity and simplicity. In show after show, rewards and punishments follow quickly and logically. Crises are resolved, problems are solved, and justice, or at least authority, always triumphs. The central characters in these dramas are clearly defined: dedicated or corrupt; selfless or ambitious; efficient or ineffectual. To insure the widest acceptability (or greatest potential profitability) the plot lines follow the most commonly accepted notions of morality and justice, whether or not those notions bear much resemblance to reality.

In order to complete a story entertainingly in only an hour or even a half hour, conflicts on TV are usually personal and solved by action. Since violence is dramatic, and relatively simple to produce, much of the action tends to be violent. As a result, the stars of prime-time network TV have for years been cowboys, detectives, and others whose lives permit unrestrained action. Except in comic roles, one rarely sees a leading man burdened by real-life constraints, such as family, that inhibit freewheeling activity.

For the past four years, we have been conducting surveys to discover how people are affected by watching the world of television. We ask them questions about aspects of real life that are portrayed very differently on TV from the way they exist in the real world. We then compare the responses of light and heavy viewers, controlling for sex, education, and other factors.

Anyone trying to isolate the effects of television viewing has the problem of separating it from other cultural influences. In fact, it is difficult to find a sufficiently large sample of nonviewers for comparison. For this article we have compared the responses of light viewers, who watch an average of two hours or less per day, and heavy viewers, who watch an average of four or more hours per day. We also surveyed 300 teenagers in the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades, among whom the heavy viewers watched six hours or more per day.

The Heavy Viewer

Since the leading characters in American television programs are nearly always American, we asked our respondents: "About what percent of the world's population live in the United States?" The correct answer is six percent. The respondents were given a choice of three percent or nine percent, which obliged them either to underestimate or overestimate the correct percentage. Heavy viewers were 19 percent more likely to pick the higher figure than were the light viewers.

We next took up the subject of occupations, since the occupational census in prime time bears little resemblance to the real economy. Professional and managerial roles make up about twice as large a proportion of the labor force on TV as they do in the real world. To find out if this distortion had any effect on viewers, we asked: "About what percent of Americans who have jobs are either professionals or managers—like doctors, lawyers, teachers, proprietors, or other executives?" When forced to make a choice between either 10 or 30 percent (the correct figure is 20 percent), the heavy viewers were 36 percent more likely to overestimate.

One might argue, correctly, that heavy viewing of television tends to be associated with lower education and other socioeconomic factors that limit or distort one's knowledge about the real world. But when we controlled for such alternative sources of information as education and newspaper reading, we found that although they did have some influence, heavy television viewing still showed a significant effect. For example, while adult respondents who had some college education were less influenced by television than those who had never attended college, heavy viewers within both categories still showed the influence of television. We obtained similar results when we compared regular newspaper readers with occasional readers or nonreaders.

The only factor that seemed to have an independent effect on the responses was age. Regardless of newspaper reading, education, or even viewing habits, respondents under 30 consistently indicated by their responses that they were more influenced by TV than those over 30. This response difference seems especially noteworthy in that the under-30 group on the whole is better educated than its elders. But the under-30 group constitutes the first TV generation. Many of them grew up with it as teacher and babysitter, and have had lifelong exposure to its influence.

Diet of Violence

Anyone who watches evening network TV receives a heavy diet of violence. More than half of all characters on prime-time TV are involved in some violence, about one-tenth in killing. To control this mayhem, the forces of law and order dominate prime time. Among those TV males with identifiable occupations, about 20 percent are engaged in law enforcement. In the real world, the proportion runs less than one percent. Heavy viewers of television were 18 percent more likely than light viewers to overestimate the number of males employed in law enforcement, regardless of age, sex, education, or reading habits.

Violence on television leads viewers to perceive the real world as more dangerous than it really is, which must also influence the way people behave. When asked, "Can most people be trusted?" the heavy viewers were 35 percent more likely to check "Can't be too careful."

When we asked viewers to estimate their own chances of being involved in some type of violence during any given week, they provided further evidence that television can induce fear. The heavy viewers were 33 percent more likely than light viewers to pick such fearful estimates as 50–50 or one in 10, instead of a more plausible one in 100.

While television may not directly cause the results that have turned up in our stud-

ies, it certainly can confirm or encourage certain views of the world. The effect of TV should be measured not just in terms of immediate change in behavior, but also by the extent to which it cultivates certain views of life. The very repetitive and predictable nature of most TV drama programs helps to reinforce these notions.

Victims, like criminals, must learn their proper roles, and televised violence may perform the teaching function all too well [see "A Nation of Willing Victims," *Psychology Today*, April 1975]. Instead of worrying only about whether television violence causes individual displays of aggression in the real world, we should also be concerned about the way such symbolic violence influences our assumptions about social reality. Acceptance of violence and passivity in the face of injustice may be consequences of far greater social concern than occasional displays of individual aggression.

Throughout history, once a ruling class has established its rule, the primary function of its cultural media has been the legitimization and maintenance of its authority. Folk tales and other traditional dramatic stories have always reinforced established authority, teaching that when society's rules are broken retribution is visited upon the violators. The importance of the existing social order is always explicit in such stories.

We have found that violence on primetime network TV cultivates exaggerated assumptions about the threat of danger in the real world. Fear is a universal emotion, and easy to exploit. The exaggerated sense of risk and insecurity may lead to increasing demands for protection, and to increasing pressure for the use of force by established authority. Instead of threatening the social order, television may have become our chief instrument of social control.