MEDIA, CRISIS AND DEMOCRACY

Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order

edited by
Marc Raboy and Bernard Dagenais

SAGE Publications
London · Newbury Park · New Delhi

First published 1992

SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Newbury Park, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
32, M-Block Market
Greater Kailash – I
New Delhi 110 048

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order. – (Media, Culture & Society Series)
I. Raboy, Marc II. Dagenais, Bernard
III. Series
302.23

ISBN 0–8039–8639–4
ISBN 0–8039–8640–8 (pbk)

Library of Congress catalog card number 91–051187

Typeset by The Word Shop, Bury, Lancs.
Printed in Great Britain by The Cromwell Press Ltd, Broughton Gifford, Melksham, Wiltshire.

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Violence and Terror in and by the Media

George Gerbner

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the role of media violence and terror in provoking a siege mentality, and their more general functions in governance, research and policy.[1]

Much of the controversy over press coverage of violence and terrorism revolves around who should control the news – public authorities, private media corporations or information sources. Media are the cultural arms of any establishment. Private media relate to public authorities as church did to state in medieval times. It is a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependence and tension.

Western industrial societies relegate news control to private media as long as that poses no threat to established law and order. If, when or whether it does is a political and legal issue. News sources have few rights in the game. At best, they trade control over information for visibility or notoriety.

Struggles for participation, representation and power are shifting from military and political arenas to new cultural spheres. We have entered an era in which control by camera is gradually reducing the need for control by armed force.[2] 'Arms control' and reduction become more feasible as cultural controls (often more efficient and certainly more entertaining) gain in effectiveness.

Live coverage of terrorists, forced manifestos, extensive publicity of unrest and protest, in other words anything that lets insurgents speak for themselves, risks wrestling control of cameras and context, even if briefly, from the system. When that happens the state (army or police) threatens to crack down or actually steps in to restore control and settle political scores, often more than the provocation warrants.

The abduction of one government official and the murder of another in October 1970 gave the Front de Libération du Québec the leverage to communicate its manifesto to the public of Canada and the world. This challenge to control of mainstream media plunged Canada into its worst peacetime crisis. Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked, and Parliament approved (with 190 in favour and only 16 New Democratic Party members opposed), the War Measures Act. Hundreds were arrested, liberties were suspended, and the press was muzzled for over five months (see chapter by Dagenais in this volume – ed.). The structural consequences of the

'October Crisis' for Canadian broadcasting were described by Raboy (1990a: 204–8).

Highly publicized insurgent terrorism served to justify the imposition of military dictatorship, followed by even greater state terrorism in Argentina and Turkey. Onyegin's (1986) study of the Turkish case shows how killings were lumped together with legitimate strikes and protest demonstrations to criminalize and stigmatize political opposition and pave the way for the military. But the relatively crude and unpopular military rule may give way to cultural pressure. Anxious and insecure people lacking clear-cut political alternatives may accept, and appear to welcome, a crackdown even by 'democratic' authorities if it can be presented as relief from a terrorist or other criminal menace.

Comparative studies of labelling and coverage of terrorism reveal unreliable statistics and blatantly political uses. The authoritative chronology of transnational terrorism by Mickolus (1980) showed that the frequency of incidents peaked in 1972 with 480 that year, and subsequently declined. Nevertheless, US media and government policy put increasing emphasis on terrorism, justifying interventions in the strategic Middle East. Iraq was removed from the US list of nations sponsoring terrorism in 1982 and given extensive credits and arms to use against Iran, until it invaded Kuwait. Syria was similarly rewarded for taking a stand against Iraq in 1990. There was no comparable consideration or coverage of equally widespread state terrorism in many countries of Africa, Latin America or Asia.

Although international terrorism against states receives most attention, Bassiouni (1981, 1982) and others point out that terrorist acts by states and in a national context are far more numerous. 'Disappearances', bombings, kidnappings and state violence in many countries, often unreported, claim thousands of times more victims than do well-publicized acts of anti-state and international terror.

While the physical casualties of highly publicized terrorist acts have been relatively few, the political and military uses have been far-reaching. Less than 1 per cent of all casualties of international terrorism in 1985 were American, but they prompted the forcing down of an Egyptian airliner and the bombing of Tripoli (probably based, as it turned out, on false intelligence).

Wurth-Hough (1983) documented the role of US network news coverage of terrorism in selecting events and defining issues according to political preference. Paletz et al. (1982) analysed *The New York Times*' coverage of the IRA, the Red Brigades and the Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional (FALN) from 1 July 1977 to 30 June 1979 and found no basis for the charge that coverage legitimizes the cause of terrorist organizations. On the contrary, 70 per cent of the stories mentioned neither the cause nor the objectives of the terrorists; almost 75 per cent mentioned neither the organization nor its supporters; and the 7 per cent that did mention names placed them in a context of statements issued by authorities.

In another study of US network news, Milburn et al. (1987) noted the frequent omission of any causal explanation for terrorist acts, and the attribution of mental instability to terrorists and their leaders. (Similar acts directed against countries other than the United States were more frequently explained.) The implication, the researchers noted, was that 'you can't negotiate with crazy people'.

Knight and Dean (1982) provided a detailed account of how the Canadian press coverage of the siege and recapturing of the Iranian embassy in London from Arab nationalist 'gunmen' served to assert the efficiency and legitimacy of violence by the British Special Forces. In the process of transforming crime and punishment into a selectively choreographed newsworthy event, the media 'have to some extent assumed the functions of moral and political – in short, ideological – reproduction performed previously (and limitedly) by the visibility of the public event itself'. It is not accidental, the authors claimed, that highly publicized and 'morally coherent' scenarios of violence and terror have made public punishment unnecessary as demonstrations of state ideology and power.

Typically isolated from their historical and social context, denied legitimacy of conditions or cause, and portrayed as unpredictable and irrational, if not insane, those labelled terrorists symbolize a menace that rational and humane means cannot reach or control. Paletz and Dunn (1969) studied the effects of news coverage of urban riots in the United States and concluded that the attempt to present a view acceptable to most readers failed to illuminate the conditions in the black communities that led to the riots. News of civil disturbance shares with coverage of terrorist activity the tendency to cultivate a pervasive sense of fear and danger, and the consequent acceptability of harsh measures to combat it.

DeBoer (1979) summarized survey results in five countries and found that although terrorists claimed relatively few victims, the media coverage cultivated a sense of imminent danger that only unusual steps could overcome. Six or seven out of ten respondents in the United States, the United Kingdom and the Federal Republic of Germany favoured the introduction of the death penalty for terrorists. Similar majorities approved using a 'special force' that would hunt down and kill terrorists in any country; placing them 'under strict surveillance, even though our country might then somewhat resemble a police state'; using 'extra stern and harsh action' unlike against other criminals; and 'limitations of personal rights by such measures as surveillance and house searches' in order to 'combat terrorism'.

The symbolic functions and political uses of 'wars' on drugs and 'drug lords' have joined images of violence and terror as highly selective and ideologically shaped portrayals. They serve as projective devices that isolate acts and people from meaningful contexts and set them up to be stigmatized.

Stigma is a mark of disgrace that evokes disgraceful behaviour. Labelling some people barbarians makes it easier to treat them as barbarians would.

Calling them aggressors justifies aggression against them, presumably to uphold the dictum that 'aggression must not pay'. Classifying some people as criminals permits dealing with them in ways otherwise considered criminal. Proclaiming them enemies makes it legitimate to attack and kill them. Naming some people crazy or insane makes it possible to suspend rules of rationality and decency towards them. Labelling a person or group terrorist seems to justify terrorizing them.

Stigmatization and demonization isolate their targets and set them up to be victimized. The cultural context in which that can precipitate social paranoia and political crisis is the historically unprecedented discharge of media violence into the mainstream of common consciousness. The ultimate victim is a community's ability to think rationally and creatively about conflict, injustice and tragedy.

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with images of violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations such as the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive infusion of colourful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever-larger areas of the world.

Of course, there was blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. It *is* a violent world. Systematic torture, 'death squads' and other forms of terror rule many states. Wholesale violations of human rights keep Amnesty International busy. Media spotlight, selective as it is,[3] makes massacres and genocides more difficult to hide. Such facts are often invoked to argue that violent story-telling is not new and that it still did not make us into monsters.

Well, that may be debatable. The US is the undisputed homicide capital of the world. It also leads all industrialized countries in jailing and executing people.[4] But if real-life and cultural violence and terror stem from common cultural roots, the mechanism cannot be simple imitation. If it were, we would all be reeling under the blows of our children and stalking the streets as muggers rather than potential victims. Our research of over 25 years suggests that the dynamics of violence and terror are much more complex, even if not much less repressive.

Violence is a legitimate and necessary cultural expression. It is a dramatic balancing of deadly conflicts and compulsions against tragic costs. Even catering to morbid and other pathological fascinations may have its poetic or commercial licence. Historically limited, individually crafted and selectively used symbolic misanthropy is not the issue. That has been swamped by television violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly-line, saturating the mainstream of our common culture.

Audience appeal and broadcaster greed are said to play a part in the prevalence of violence on television. But neither these nor other historic rationalizations can fully explain, let alone justify, drenching nearly every home in the rapidly expanding 'free world' with graphic scenes of expertly choreographed brutality.

The incremental profits of manufacturing and exporting such a troubling

commodity as images of violence (as distinct from other dramatic qualities) is hardly worth its human and institutional risks and costs. Most highly rated programmes are non-violent. Using 'sex and violence' appeals in programme promotion has little effect on ratings (Williams, 1989). Economies of scale in cheaply produced violence formulas may have some financial advantages to programme producers. But there is no general correlation between violence and the ratings of comparable programmes aired at the same time.

Why would mainstream media, the cultural arms of established society, undermine their own security for dubious and paltry benefits? Why would they persist in inviting charges of inciting to crime? Why would they suffer public and legislative criticism and face international condemnation? Halloran (1977) suggested an answer when he wrote that the conventional hand-wringing about the media overkill, focusing only on imitation and incitation to crime, misses the point. His own research on protest demonstrations showed that in featuring even trivial or irrelevant violence, the media achieve certain 'positive' symbolic values.

A 'positive' value equal to that of profits is, of course, power. A marketplace is an arena of control by power. Left to itself it tends towards monopoly, or total power. Violence is a demonstration of power. Images of violence project hierarchies of power – gender, racial, sexual, class and national power – that the mass-cultural marketplace cultivates through its control of dramatic imagery rather than through consumer choice or commercial need alone. A marketable taste for a nightly quota of violence may be acquired more through assiduous cultivation from infancy rather than free and broad choice. The need for it may be political as much as commercial: to get, hold and wield (or cater to) power. Media violence is its cheapest and clearest symbolic expression.

Violence in its most reliably observable form is a physical show of force. It is making one do or submit to something against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed. It demonstrates who has the power to impose what on whom under what circumstances. It illuminates the ability to lash out, provoke, intimidate and annihilate. It designates winners and losers, victimizers and victims, champions and wimps.

In real life that demonstration is costly, risky and disruptive. In story-telling it is usually clear, compelling and instructive. Violent stories symbolize threats to human integrity and to the established order. They demonstrate how these threats are combated, how order is restored (often violently), and how its violators (though rarely its violent enforcers) are themselves victimized. Far from only inciting subversion, they display society's pecking order. In tragedy, rare in commercial entertainment, the hero dies unjustly but the idea lives on to triumph perhaps another day. The story-teller relinquishes control; s/he cannot help us any more; it's up to all of us to fight injustice. In formula violence with happy endings, offenders die but the hero lives on to protect good people another day. Who is who and what is what depends on who has the right looks and the

badge; the story-teller keeps our fate under control. Things will turn out all right if we are on the right side (or look and act as if we were). Crime may not pay in the world of dramatic fiction, but violence always does – for the winner. A tragic sense of life – energizing, empowering – does not deliver viewers in the mood to buy.

The power to define violence and project its lessons, including stigmatization, demonization and the selective labelling of terror and terrorists, is the chief cultural requirement for social control. The ability and protected right to mass-produce and discharge it into the common symbolic environment may be a decisive (if unacknowledged) concentration of culture-power in domestic and global policy making.

Media violence is a political scenario on several levels. As a symbolic exercise, it is a demonstration of power: of who has it, who uses it, and who loses it. As a subject of media research, it has been a source of funding and ammunition for various positions in a debate purportedly about violence but really about media control and reform. The media themselves shape and manipulate the terms of the debate. Legislators milk the political juice in it.

In the US, the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy and the Reverend Dr Martin Luther King, Jr led to the establishment in 1968 of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Its Mass Media Task Force commissioned me to provide a reliable analysis of violence on television. That was the beginning of what has become the longest-running ongoing media research project, called Cultural Indicators. The project relates the analysis of television content to a variety of viewer conceptions and social consequences. It has provided research support for movements for media literacy, critical analysis and reform, and some protection to broadcasters against unjustified claims and scapegoating.

The Task Force Report by Baker and Ball (1969) presented our analysis. It established a standard format for tracking violence in network drama and revealed the high level of its frequency, a level that has not changed much over the years. Equally important was its systematic description of television violence not as a simple act but as a complex social scenario of power and victimization.

Media coverage of the report mentioned only the amount of violence, followed by charges and denials of violent imitation and incitation. The pattern of press reporting of media violence research, to which we shall return, focused on the potential threat individual acts of aggression and violence might pose to law and order. The social dynamics of violence and victimization, with its suggestion of power-play and intimidation, were of no media interest.

The Task Force called for remedial action by government and the media which, like many others that followed, went unheeded. But it moved Senator John Pastore to ask President Nixon for a larger investigation to safeguard public law and order. That investigation resulted in what are

generally called the Surgeon General's Reports.

A Scientific Advisory Committee to the United States Surgeon General found indications of a causal relation between violence on television and 'aggressive behaviour" among some viewers (Comstock et al., 1972). In 1980, another Surgeon General's Advisory Committee was formed to review and summarize progress since the 1972 Report (Pearl et al., 1982). Both reported that television cultivates exaggerated beliefs about the prevalence of violence and heightens feelings of insecurity and mistrust among most groups of heavy viewers, and especially among women and minorities.

The Cultural Indicators research, the source of these conclusions (see Gerbner et al., 1986a, 1986b), also found that viewing cultivates a commonality of perspectives among otherwise different groups with respect to overarching themes and patterns found in many programmes. That tends to erode traditional differences among divergent social groups. The outlooks of heavy viewers are closer to each other than are the outlooks of comparable groups of light viewers.

Subsequent research refined and extended these findings into many areas of television 'cultivation' (see Signorielli and Morgan, 1990). These studies and their implications represent a new approach to media effects research, with special relevance to violence.

Research on the consequences of exposure to mass-mediated violence has a long and involved history. Most of it has focused on limited aspects of the complex scenario. It has been motivated (and dominated) by institutional interest in threats of individual imitation, incitation, brutalization and subversion. Much research has concentrated on observable and measurable psychological traits and states – such as aggressiveness – that were presumed to lead to violence and could be attributed to media exposure.

Research on aggression has been the most prominent 'media violence story'. Although ostensibly critical of media, it may have been the preferred story because it is the easiest to neutralize and the least damaging to basic institutional interests and policies.

Aggressiveness is an ambivalent concept with positive as well as negative connotations. It is a traditional part of male role socialization. Its link to most real violence and crime, which is socially organized and systemic rather than personal and private, is tenuous, to say the least. It can even be argued that too many people submit too meekly to exploitation, injustice, indignity and intimidation.

Approaches that focus on aggression and lawlessness view violence from the law enforcement point of view. They distract attention from official violence and state terrorism, and from economic and social conditions most closely related to individual violence and crime.

Traditional effects research models are based on selectively used media, messages and campaigns. They focus on selective exposures 'causing' attitude change, viewer preferences, etc. They miss the essential and

unique feature of television culture: its universal, stable and pervasive cultivation of conceptions about life and social relationships in large communities over long periods of time.

Television is a relatively non-selectively used medium. Virtually inescapable exposure to televised images of violence goes on from cradle to grave. The television answer to the age-old media cause-and-effects question 'what comes first, the chicken or the egg?' is: the hatchery. Television is at the centre of the new cultural hatchery.

The recurrent notions of 'powerful' audiences 'resisting' cultivation, producing their own 'popular culture' and their own 'uses and gratifications' are irrelevant to the new approach to television cultivation. They focus on differences in perception and response but ignore or minimize the commonalities television cultivates, commonalities decisive for broader issues in matters of public policy.[5]

Seldom asked and rarely publicized are these broader questions of policy. They deal with victimization and control, as well as with aggression. The key question is not what 'causes' most violence and crime, as that goes far beyond media. It is: what contribution does constant exposure to certain scenarios of violence and terror make to different groups' conceptions of their own risks and vulnerabilities, to a society's approach to conflict, to the distribution of power, and to the likelihood of its abuse.

These questions do not fit the typical media violence story. They are more likely to challenge their assumptions and expose their social and political functions. It is not surprising, then, that they are seldom asked, rarely publicized and, as we shall see, sometimes strenuously resisted or distorted.

US children are born into a symbolic environment of six to eight violent acts per prime-time hour (where four-fifths of their viewing is concentrated), four times as many in presumably humorous children's programmes, and two entertaining murders a night. Contrary to the hype that promoted them, most actual uses of cable, video and other new technologies make the dominant patterns penetrate even more deeply (but not more cheaply) into everyday life.[6]

Television viewing is a time-bound activity. One must give credit to the creative artists and other professionals who seize opportunities – few and far between though they may be – to challenge and even counter the massive flow of formula programming. But most people watch television by the clock, not by the individual programme.

The overarching dramatic messages and images found in many programmes tend to cultivate common conceptions most relevant to public policy making. Violence is the most vivid and prominent of these inescapable presentations. Studies by Sun (1989) and Signorielli (1986) show that the average viewer has little opportunity to avoid frequently recurring patterns such as violence. Large audiences watch violent programmes scheduled in time periods when large audiences watch television.

The world of prime time is cast for its favourite dramatic plays – power

plays. Men outnumber women at least three to one. Young people, old people and minorities have many times less than their share of representation. Compared to white American middle-class heterosexual males in the 'prime of life', all others have a more restricted and stereotyped range of roles, activities and opportunities, and less than their share of success and power. But they have more than their share of vulnerability and victimization.

The cultivation of conceptions of self and society implicit in these portrayals begins in infancy. For the first time in human history, major responsibility for the formative socializing process of story-telling has passed from parents and churches and schools to a small group of global conglomerates that have something to sell.[7]

The moderate viewer of prime time in the US sees every week an average of 21 criminals (domestic and foreign) arrayed against an army of 41 public and private law enforcers. There are also 14 doctors, six nurses, six lawyers and two judges to handle them. An average of 150 acts of violence and about 15 murders entertain us and our children every week, and that does not count cartoons and the news. Those who watch over three hours a day (more than half the people) absorb much more. Graze the channels any night for just 15 minutes. Chances are that you can linger over bodies (on or off screen) who had been threatened, terrorized, beaten, raped, killed and perhaps mutilated. And they will not be just any bodies. Most likely they will be bodies of women, violated often just as curtain-raisers to the real 'he-man action'.

The violence we see on television bears little or no relationship to its actual occurrence. Neither frequency nor type resemble trends in crime statistics. They follow marketing strategies that inject relatively cheap dramatic formulas into otherwise often dull 'action programs'. But, as we have suggested, the action goes far beyond markets and profits.

Our ongoing research (Gerbner, 1988, etc) has found that exposure to violence-laden television cultivates an exaggerated sense of insecurity, mistrust and anxiety. Heavy viewers buy more guns, locks and watchdogs for protection than comparable groups of light viewers. A sense of vulnerability and dependence imposes its heaviest burdens on women and some minorities. For every 10 white males who commit violence in network television drama, 12 are victimized. For every 10 white women violents, 16 suffer victimization. For every 10 foreign or minority women, 22 become victims, doubling the ratio of vulnerability (Signorielli, 1990). The pattern of violence and victimization presents a mean world in which everyone is at risk (but some more than others). Happy endings assure the viewer that although evil and deadly menace lurks around every corner, strong, swift and violent solutions are always available and efficient. Contrary to charges of liberal bias, our research shows that a political correlate of television viewing is the virtual collapse of a liberal orientation (Gerbner et al., 1982).

These are highly exploitable sentiments. They contribute to the

irresistibility of punitive and vindictive demands and slogans ranging from 'lenient judges' to capital punishment. They make the politics of a Willie Horton and a Willie Bennett hard to resist.[8] They lend themselves to the political appeal of 'wars' on crime, and drugs and terrorists that heighten repression but fail to address root causes.

Riding the wave of citizen activism and reformist zeal of the late 1960s, Senator John Pastore espoused television violence as his 'issue' and held a series of legislative committee hearings on it. In a climactic session in 1974, I reported our findings on both the incidence of violence and an indication of what the most pervasive consequences of exposure might be. But the cultivation of insecurity and dependence seemed too complex and 'academic' for Pastore. He kept pressing for an answer to the law-and-order question: 'Does it lead to violent behavior?' Pastore's support was needed for the renewal of our research grant. I finally gave him the answer he wanted which, while true, was not the most significant new research finding.

A decade of commissions, research reports and committee hearings had produced no lasting policy change. A short-lived 'family hour' (which only its originator, CBS, ever observed) resulted in an anti-trust legal challenge and quick retreat even from existing network programme codes.

Upon Pastore's retirement, a House subcommittee headed by Lionel Van Deerlin took up the television violence cudgels. A group of newly elected and more independent-minded and militant members and staff than previous committees, armed with critical research, decided to cut through the ritual. Dragging their reluctant chairman along, the 'Young Turks' produced a well-documented draft report in 1977. It was the first time that a committee had attempted to draft a report, let alone legislation. Furthermore, the draft called for an investigation of the structure of the television industry as the only way to get to the roots of the 'violence problem'.

When the draft mentioning industry structure was leaked to the networks, all hell broke loose. Big political contributors in Van Deerlin's district were contacted. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) threatened reprisals on other bills dear to Van Deerlin's heart, including a rewrite of the Communications Act of 1934, the basic law of American broadcasting. Members of the subcommittee told me that they had never before been subjected to such relentless lobbying and pressure.

The report was delayed for months. Van Deerlin caved in and tried to downplay the recommendation. The staffer who wrote the final draft was summarily fired. The day before the decisive vote, a new version drafted by the NAB lobbyist was substituted. It ignored the evidence of the hearings and gutted the report, shifting the source of the problem from network structure to the parents of America. The press featured the watered-down version as the long-awaited 'anti-violence report'.

The surrender was in vain. The rewrite bill was scuttled anyway. Van Deerlin was defeated in the next election. The broadcast reform movement

collapsed. Foundation support for citizen action dried up. The coming era of market rule and private power, misnamed "deregulation', saw the dismantling of most public protections built up through many years.

The Young Turks of 1977, smarting from their defeat and dismayed at the collapse of the public constituency for broadcast reform, made another attempt in 1981. Under the leadership of then Congressman Timothy Wirth, a series of hearings attempted to revive the media violence issue. Many of the actors of 1977 were trotted out on the same stage. Our Cultural Indicators Violence Profile was introduced showing record levels and continued cultivation of insecurity and mistrust, the 'mean world syndrome'.

But this was the 1980s and the 'public trust' concept of the Communications Act was in full retreat. Instead of all major networks, as at previous hearings, only CNN covered the hearing and only because its president, Ted Turner, was the lead-off witness. The hearing was billed 'a forum for dialogue among interested parties', and went nowhere. There was no general press coverage, no report and of course no bill.

Only one reference was made to our most telling basic findings. Representative Cardiss Collins, the only woman on the subcommittee, noted that our 'research shows that when women and minority types encounter violence on television they are more likely to end up as victims than the majority types'. Then she said: 'You stated, "The real questions that must be asked are not just how much violence there is, but also how fair, how just, how necessary, how effective, and at what price".' And she wondered aloud: 'Are you saying that the price to the well-being of our society is much too high?' (United States Congress, 1982: 230–31). No one on the subcommittee followed up her question, or my answer.

The last substantive remark of the hearing was made by Representative Al Swift, who, recalling the fiasco of 1977, concluded that 'We ought to be careful in our frustration of what television is doing to us that we do not take an axe to the tail of the tiger and think we have accomplished something. We may have accomplished a little bit, but it is the other end of the tiger that is ultimately going to get us'. (United States Congress, 1982: 235).

The tiger is riding high. The cultivation of mistrust and paranoia in everyday life robs civilization of its civility. Hospitality and kindness to strangers seem quaint if not irresponsible anachronisms. Children learn early to beware of adults and, when they grow up, to stop for no one on the highway. When a 6-year-old Italian girl whose father fell unconscious at the wheel ran bleeding and crying on the highway for 30 minutes while cars zipped by, the shock prompted a searching of souls, and of media. 'We have begun to show the cold glacial face for which only recently we used to rebuke other countries that once were richer than ours', said an article in *Corriere della Sera*. *L'Unita* lamented that in the age of television, 'A sheet of glass has been interposed between us and the world that once and for all eliminates real, tangible, and sensitive awareness of others' (reported in

The New York Times, 19/7/90: A1).

A never-to-be-declared state of symbolic emergency is pitting white male heterosexual 'prime-of-life' middle-class power against the majorities of humankind living in the ghettos of America and what used to be called the Third World before the Second collapsed into the First. The Cold War may be winding down; the war on poverty has turned into a war on the poor. The cultural props for imperial policy are shifting from their anti-communist rationalizations to a sharp and selective offensive against real and concocted terrorists, narco-terrorists, petro-terrorists and other dark demons. An overkill of violent imagery helps to mobilize support for taking charge of the unruly at home and abroad.[9]

Movies of the decade follow or lead and, in any case, cash in on the trend. With theatrical distribution dominated by a few chains, local cinema-goers have less and less to choose from. Escalation of the body count seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on global mayhem. *Robocop*'s first rampage for law and order in 1987 killed 32 people. The 1990 *Robocop 2*, targeting a 12-year-old 'drug lord', among others, slaughters 81. The sick movie *Death Wish* claimed 9 victims in 1974. In the 1988 version the 'bleeding heart liberal' turned vigilante disposes of 52. *Rambo: First Blood*, released in 1985, rambled through Southeast Asia leaving 62 corpses. In the 1988 release, *Rambo III* visits Afghanistan, killing 106. The daredevil cop in the original *Die Hard* in 1988 saved the day with a modest 18 dead. Two years later, *Die Hard 2* thwarts a plot to rescue 'the biggest drug dealer in the world', coincidentally a Central American dictator to be tried in a US court, achieving a phenomenal body count of 264.[10] But the decade's record goes to the 1990 summer children's movie and tie-in marketing sensation and glorification of the culture of martial-arts violence, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. With its 133 acts of mayhem *per hour*, it was 'the most violent film that has ever been marketed to children and given a "PG" rating', reported the National Coalition on Television Violence.

As the Cold War turns into a new Holy Alliance, the superpowers can concentrate on securing their ever more precarious hold on the remaining privileges and shrinking resources of a world liberated from some bankrupt forms of domination but increasingly free and open to symbolic invasion. The floodgates are opening for unrestrained penetration of media violence 'Made in the USA' in the name of democracy. Few countries are willing or able to invest in a cultural policy that does not surrender the socialization of their children and the future of their language, culture and society to 'market forces'. That is more likely to contribute to the resurgence of chauvinism, clericalism and neo-fascism than to open, diverse and humane democratic cultures around the world.

The mass production of images and messages of violence plays a perhaps small but pivotal part in the new imperial network. The questions we must ask are those of Congresswoman Collins: how just and how necessary, not just how much? And how long can the 'benefits' outweigh the costs and the

risks? Isn't the price much too high already?

Bombarding viewers with violent images of a mean and dangerous world remains, in the last analysis, an instrument of intimidation and terror. This is not an isolated problem that can be addressed by focusing on media violence alone. It is an integral part of a market-dominated system of global cultural commercialism that permeates the mainstream of the common symbolic environment. Only a new international environmental movement, a cultural environmental movement dedicated to democratic media reform, can do justice to the challenge of violence and terror in and by media.

Notes

1 For an extended summary and analysis of research on media violence and terror see Gerbner (1988). Parts of this chapter have appeared in an earlier version (Gerbner, 1991).

2 The 'dominoes' of Eastern Europe fell ever more rapidly as television cameras, not guns, were turned the 'wrong' way. Even in Romania where armed resistance was attempted, showing the execution of the Ceausescus on national and world television put an end to it.

3 Political priorities and media attention make reporting of loss of life around the world not only selective but also unequal. The CIA-assisted bloodbath of 'communists' in Indonesia in 1965, 'one of the worst mass murders of the twentieth century', received scant notice at the time (see eg *Columbia Journalism Review* 12/90: 8–14). The 'whole world witnessed' the 'Tiananmen Square massacre' – or did it? (see Munro (1990) and Black (1990)). In any case, the similar crackdowns in Kwangju, South Korea, in 1980 (under US tutelage), and in Burma in 1988, had no worldwide witness. Studies of disaster news conclude that in terms of media space and time allocated to it, the death of one Western European equals three Eastern Europeans, nine Latin Americans and twelve Asians (Adams, 1986).

4 One of every 133 Americans will become a murder victim (US Bureau of Justice Statistics Technical Report, 3/87: NCJ–104274). The US rate of killings is 21.9 per 100,000 men aged from 15 to 24. The rate, for example, for Austria is 0.3, for England 1.2, and for Scotland (highest after the US) 5.0 (National Center for Health Statistics study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and reported in *The New York Times*, 27/6/90: A10). Between 1985 and 1989 the number of homicides in the US nationwide increased 22 per cent (Congressional hearings reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 1/8/90). The US rate of incarceration is 407 per 1,000,000 citizens. This compares to 36 in the Netherlands, 86 in West Germany, and 100 in England. While the prison population in the US doubled in the 1980s, the crime rate rose 1.8 per cent, suggesting that the 'need to incarcerate' is out of proportion with the actual crime rate but is a political response to culturally generated insecurity and demand for repression (see, for example, a study by criminologist Nils Christie reported in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 5/7/90). There is no evidence that capital punishment is a greater deterrent than a life sentence (Phillips and Hensley, 1984: 109), or that it relates to lower crime rates (Gartner, 1990). Cross-cultural comparative studies suggest that killing – both legal and illegal – and 'the need to incarcerate' stem from common cultural roots. 'Acts of violence', concluded criminologist Gartner (1990: 102) 'may be a part of a common cultural desensitization'.

5 Todd Gitlin (1990: 191) writes: 'Some of yesterday's outriders of youth culture have become theorists scavenging the clubs, the back alleys and video channels for a "resistance" they are convinced, a priori, must exist. Failing to find radical potential in the politics of parties or mass movements, they exalt "resistance" in subcultures, or, one step on, in popular styles, or even – to take it one step further – in the observation that viewers watch TV with any attitude other than devoted rapture. "Resistance" – meaning all sorts of grumbling, multiple interpretation, semiological inversion, pleasure, rage, friction, numbness, what have

you – "resistance" is accorded dignity, even glory, by stamping these not-so-great refusals with a vocabulary derived from life-threatening work against fascism – as if the same concept should serve for the Chinese student uprising and cable TV grazing.'

6 Two-thirds of home video recording is of network programmes. Video rentals bring movies rarely permitted on television and usually restricted (R-rated) in cinemas into the home for unrestricted viewing. Yang and Linz (1990) found that in a representative sample of 30 such videos only one did not portray violence, and six out of ten included sexual violence.

7 Just as many intellectuals find it difficult to recognize the severe limitations media impose on concepts of pluralism and choice, many writers who see television as just another artistic outlet find it difficult to accept the responsibility of the creator for what is a native environment rather than a freely chosen artistic product. The biographer of Stephen J. Cannell, writer of some of the most violent television programmes, complained that 'It is difficult to imagine any other medium in which the artist is burdened with as much guilt and social responsibility by as many people as on television' (R.J. Thompson, 1990: 42).

8 Willie Horton was of course the 'furloughed criminal' in the contrived Bush 1988 campaign commercial. Willie Bennett was a real near-victim of the 'Stuart case' in Boston in 1989. When white suburban businessman Charles Stuart described a black man as the murderer of his wife, the police quickly accepted and publicized his story. A small army of police invaded and terrorized black neighbourhoods and picked up Bennett as a likely suspect, while demands for more jails and the death penalty echoed in the hysterical media coverage. Stuart identified Bennett in a police line-up as the killer. Later the killer turned out to be Stuart himself.

9 How selective the menace can be is suggested by the fact that the US invades, bombs (the poor districts), takes control and delivers to the old oligarchy an over-independent Panama (coincidentally, soon to take possession of the Canal), ostensibly to capture a head of state and former CIA-client charged with narcotics traffic, but releases an Orlando Bosch who blew up a Cuban airliner killing 73 civilian passengers aboard (*The New York Times*, 18/7/90: 1).

10 Count by Vincent Canby (*The New York Times*, 16/7/90: C11). Canby observed that William Wellman's 1931 *Public Enemy* shocked viewers and critics (*The Times* reviewer noted its 'general slaughter') despite the fact that each of its eight deaths takes place offscreen. But, Canby observes, 'death and mortal injury were treated with discretion then, at least in part because the then-new Production Code took a dim view of mayhem for its own sake'.