Television Violence, Victimization, and Power

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In the 30 years that we have lived with television, public concern with the medium's predilection for violence has been reflected in at least eight separate congressional hearings, a special report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969, and a massive study of television and social behavior commissioned by the Surgeon General. In the years since 1972, the flow of research and debate has continued. While scientific caution requires us to proceed carefully, some conclusions can be drawn from the wealth of data and evidence that has been accumulated.

First, violence is a frequent and consistent feature of television drama. In our research violence is defined as the overt expression of physical force compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing. Using this definition we have been analyzing a sample of prime time and weekend morning network dramatic television programs annual-

ly since 1967-1968 and have found that, on the average, 80% of all prime time and weekend daytime programs and 60% of the major characters are involved with violence. The prime time rate of episodes of violence has been 5 per hour; in weekend daytime children's programs, violent episodes average almost 18 per hour. Despite the hue and cry, the frequency of violence has not changed more than 10% from the norm of 10 years.

Second, there appears to be a justifiable fear that viewing televised violence will make people, children in particular, somewhat more likely to commit acts of violence themselves. At the time of the Surgeon General's report in 1972, about 50 experimental studies indicated that viewing violence increases the likelihood of children engaging in violent behavior. Our research (Gerbner et al., 1978) also has found that young viewers who watch a lot of television are more likely to agree that it is "almost always all right" to hit someone "if you are mad at them for a good reason."

Yet, if the most consistent effect of viewing television violence were that it incited real acts of violence, we would not need elaborate research studies; the average sibling, parent, and teacher would be reeling from the blows of television-stimulated aggression. Clearly this is not the case. Imitative aggression among children may be frequent but it is at a relatively low level. Widely publicized cases of serious violence which seem to be influenced by television programs or movies are rare. At any rate, spectacular cases of individual violence threatening the social order (unlike those enforcing it) have always been blamed on some alleged corrupter of youth, from Socrates through pulps, comics, and movies, to television. Are there no other grounds for concern?

THE WORLD OF TELEVISION

In order to answer this question, we have to consider television as an institution of general enculturation. All societies have ways of explaining the world to themselves and to their children. Socially constructed reality gives a coherent picture of what

exists, what is important, how things are related, and what is right. The constant cultivation of such ostensible realities is the task of rituals and mythologies. They legitimize actions along lines that are conventionally acceptable and functional.

Television is today's central agency of the established order and as such serves primarily to maintain, stabilize, and reinforce —not subvert—conventional values, beliefs, and behaviors. The goal of entertaining the largest audience at the least cost demands that these messages follow conventional social morality.

I have also noted the two additional features of television that underlie our research, called Cultural Indicators (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1978, 1979). One is that commercial television, unlike other media, presents an organically composed total world of interrelated stories (both drama and news) produced to the same set of market specifications. Second, television audiences (unlike those for other media) view largely nonselectively and by the clock rather than by the program.

Most regular viewers are immersed in a vivid and illuminating world of television which has certain repetitive and pervasive patterns.

Overall, the world of television is three-fourths American, three-fourths between ages 30 and 60 (compared to one-third of the real population), and three-fourths male.

Clearly the world of television is not like the real world. Its demography reflects its purposes: to produce audiences for advertisers. Looking at it through the prism of age reveals a population curve which, unlike the real world but much like the curve of consumer spending, bulges in the middle years of life. That makes children and the elderly relatively neglected, old people virtually invisible, and the portrayals of these and other minorities, as well as of women, sensitive barometers of the dramatic equities of life.

Our annual monitoring of network television drama since 1967-1968 shows a remarkably consistent pattern despite changes in program titles, formats, and styles. Many times a day, seven days a week, the dramatic pattern defines situations and culti-vates premises about society, people, and issues. Casting the symbolic world has a meaning of its own. About 60% of the

characters are engaged in discernible occupational activity and can be roughly divided into three groups. The first group represents the world of legitimate business, industry, agriculture, finance, and so on. The second group is engaged in activity related to art, science, religion, health, education, and welfare, as professionals, amateurs, housewives, 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. About 25% of the leading characters act out a drama of some sort of transgression and its suppression at home and abroad.

THE ROLE OF VIOLENCE

Not surprisingly, men outnumber women four to one. In such a world, much of the action revolves around questions of power: how to manage and maintain the social order.

Violence is the key to the rule of power. It is the cheapest and quickest dramatic demonstration of who can and who cannot get away with what against whom. It is an exercise in norm setting and social typing. It occupies about one-third of all male major characters (but very few women) in depicting violations and enforcement of the rules of society.

Violence is thus a scenario of social relationships. Its calculus of opportunities and risks demonstrates one's odds upon entering the arena. In the world of television, two-thirds of all major characters get involved; the exercise is clearly a central feature of that world. (In weekend daytime children's programs the rate is 80%.) Men are more likely to encounter it than women, and adults are more involved than children, although about half of all women and children still get involved in violence. The question is who comes out of it and how. A character's chances to be a violent or a victim (or both) suggest degrees of vulnerability and probable fate.

Therefore, violence as a scenario of power has a built-in index of risk: It is the numerical relationship of violents to victims within each social group compared to other groups. That index,

called risk ratio, shows the chances of men and women, blacks and whites, young and old, and so on to come out of a violent encounter on top instead of on the bottom.

In the world of dramatic television, 46% of all major characters commit violence and 55% suffer it (with many being both violents and victims). Thus the overall risk ratio is -1.2, meaning that there are 1.2 victims for each violent. The ratio for women is -1.3; for nonwhite women -1.8; for old women -3.3. So if and when involved, women, nonwhites, and many older characters bear a higher burden of relative risk and danger than the majority types.

Of course, not all violence is alike. A blow by the oppressed against unbearable odds, by the exploited against the exploiter, may be a message of liberation rather than of the demonstration of established power. Even if the violent hero perishes (and thus counts for a victim in the risk ratio), the tragedy exposes inequity and injustice instead of perpetuating them. But considering the average output of violent episodes in a massive flow of entertainment at the average rate of 5 per prime time and 18 per weekend daytime hour, such tragic scenes are very rare. Entertainment—the most informative and educational force of any culture—is inherently pleasing precisely because it does not challenge conventional beliefs of right and might. It demands happy endings which prove fate and society to be just as well as strong. The least offensive programming at the lowest cost and best "cost per thousand," as well as the institutional interests of established society, require the cultivation of conventional morality and the stroking of conventional egos. Television violence is by and large a cheap industrial ingredient whose patterns tend to support rather than to subvert the established order.

The patterns show the power of dominant types to come out on top. They tend to cultivate acquiescence to and dependence upon their rule. If at times (though very rarely) television also incites violence by the ruled against the rulers, that may be the price paid for the tranquilization of the vast majority. To reduce that, it is not enough to decrease the number of violent incidents; the patterns of power and risk would have to give way to a more diversified and equitable demonstration.

WHAT ARE THE LESSONS?

Violence plays an important role in television's portrayal of the social order. It provides a calculus of life chances in conflict and shows the rules by which the game is played. It demonstrates the relative distributions of power and of the fear of power. The few incidents of real-life violence it incites may only serve to reinforce that fear. The scenario needs both violents and victims; both roles are there to be learned by viewers. In generating among the many a fear of the power of the few, television violence may achieve its greatest effect.

We have addressed this hypothesis in the Cultural Indicators project by determining the extent to which exposure to the *symbolic* world of television cultivates conceptions about the *real* world among viewers.

The question of the influence of broad enculturation is different from the usual research question about individual messages, campaigns, programs, and genres. Traditional procedures of media effects research must be reconceptualized and modified for television.

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 television 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.

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. Television violence is a dramatic demonstration of power which communicates much about social norms and relationships, about goals and means, about winners and losers, about 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 violents 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 FINDINGS OF RESEARCH

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

The first 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 composition 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 and different 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 television presents a pattern different from or more extreme than other sources. One such area is of course violence.

The results of our adult and child surveys show consistent learning and children's particular vulnerability to television. These results also confirm that violence-laden television not only cultivates aggressive tendencies in a minority but, perhaps more important, also 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 the question "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 4 or more hours a day) on every sample gave the higher figure in significantly greater numbers than did light viewers (watching 2 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 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, IQ. The effects are consistent and robust for both children and adults across a range of undoubtedly powerful control comparisons.

When asked about the percentage of men employed in law enforcement and crime detection, and about the percentage of crimes that are violent, significantly more heavy viewers than light viewers respond in terms more characteristic of the television world than of the real world. Mistrust is reflected in responses suggesting that heavy viewers believe that most people just look out for themselves, take advantage of others, and cannot be trusted.

Surveys of adolescents extend these findings in important new directions. These analyses are based on data collected from two samples of adolescents, one from a public school in suburban/ru-

ral New Jersey (N = 447) and one from a New York City school (N = 140). Students filled out questionnaires which offered two answers to each question, one answer based on facts or statistics (or some other view of reality) and one "television answer," which expresses the "facts" as depicted on television.

These analyses reveal that adolescent heavy viewers see the world as more violent and express more fear than do light viewers in a variety of ways, ranging from estimates of the number of people involved in violence, to perceived danger, to assumptions about police use of violence.

Heavy viewers in both the New York and New Jersey schools are more likely than light viewers to overestimate the number of people involved in violence and the proportion of people who commit serious crimes. In the New York sample, the finding is especially strong for boys, those of lower socioeconomic status, those who have not had a personal or family experience as a victim, and those with middle or low achievement scores. In the New Jersey sample, the relationship is stronger among girls, frequent newspaper readers, and heavy television news viewers, as well as among those whose fathers did not attend college. Despite these variations, the association remains consistently positive for each comparison group: Heavy viewers in every case are more likely than are light viewers to believe that a greater number of people are regularly involved in violence. Similarly, heavy viewers in the New Jersey sample are generally more likely to overestimate how many people commit serious crimes. The relationship is the strongest among female and occasional newspaper readers.

Most of the New Jersey students (about 80%) feel that it is dangerous to walk alone in a city at night. Yet within every comparison group, heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to express this opinion. This pattern is most evident among girls, occasional newspaper readers, and infrequent viewers of network news. Although most consider it dangerous, there is a fair degree of variation in who is afraid to walk alone in a city at night. The New Jersey students are more afraid than the New York students; in both samples and again especially in New Jersey, the females are considerably more afraid. Within every

group, however, heavy viewers are more likely than light viewers to express this fear.

Responses to a question about one's willingness to walk alone at night in one's own neighborhood show a strong and consistent relationship between the amount of viewing and being afraid. Females and young students are more afraid overall; these two groups also show the strongest relationship between amount of television viewing and expressing the fear of walking alone at night in one's own neighborhood.

Television viewing also seems to contribute to adolescents' images and assumptions about law enforcement procedures and activities. Among the New Jersey students, more heavy than light viewers in every subgroup believe that police must often use force and violence at a scene of violence. Among the New York students, there is a consistent positive relationship between amount of viewing and the perception of how many times a day a policeman pulls out his gun. Adolescents in New Jersey show a positive relationship across the board between amount of viewing and the tendency to believe that policemen who shoot at running persons actually hit them.

Finally, adolescent heavy viewers also tend to express mistrust in people and to express the belief that people are selfish. Although the differences are not as pronounced as they are for violence- and fear-related questions, the patterns are stable across most groups. Those who watch more television remain more likely to say that people "are mostly just looking out for themselves" (rather than trying to be helpful) and that one "can't be too careful in dealing with people" (rather than that they can be trusted).

These findings provide considerable support for the conclusion that heavy television viewers perceive social reality differently from light television viewers, even when other factors are held constant. There is considerable variation between groups in the scope and magnitude of these patterns: The extent of television's contribution is mediated, enhanced, or diminished by powerful personal, social, and cultural variables, as well as by other information sources. Yet the relationships remain positive in almost every case. The amount of viewing makes a consistent

differences in the responses of these adolescents, even the supposedly more sophisticated, less impressionable New Yorkers.

Parallel results were also found for a slightly younger age group. In a survey of 2200 7- to 11-year-old children and their parents conducted by the Foundation for Child Development, a significant relationship was found between amount of television viewing and violence-related fears even with controls for age, sex, ethnic background, vocabulary, and the child's own reports of victimization (Zill, 1979). We may conclude, then, that heavy viewers' expressions of fear and interpersonal mistrust, assumptions about the chances of encountering violence, and images of police activities can be traced in part to television portrayals.

DEMONSTRATIONS OF POWER

Given these findings that heavy television viewing cultivates pervasive fear of violence, as well as its occasional perpetration, why is the most vocal concern about television-incited violence? The answer rests in the complex nature of the social scenario called violence and its multiple functions. As action, violence hurts, kills, and scares. The last is its most important social function because that is what maintains power and compels acquiescence to power. Therefore, it is important who scares whom, and who is "trained" to be the victim.

The violence scenario thus serves a double function. By demonstrating the realities of social power, it generates fear, insecurity, and dependence, and thus serves as an instrument of social control. The objective is achieved at a great human price. The price is the incitation of the few to destructive violence, the cultivation of aggressive tendencies among some children and adults, and the generation of a sense of danger and risk in a mean and selfish world in many of our children.

There is no scientific way to determine what "price is right" for the maintenance of a society's structure of power. But the increasing number of citizens who have a feeling that the price may be too high should recognize that the mechanism for

extracting it is rooted deeply in the structure of television as a social institution.

In order to alter it, and to provide a freer, fairer, and more equitable experience for child and adult viewers alike, far-reaching measures will be necessary.

First, the education of creative resources and critical viewing skills will have to become the primary task of schooling. Liberal education was always designed to liberate the growing person from unwitting dependence on the immediate cultural environment. That is why the "great" art, science, history, and literature of an age was the heart of a liberal education. But that has always involved only a small minority. Today's fresh approach to the liberal arts demands liberation from unwitting dependence on the massproduced cultural environment that involves everyone everyday. We need education for the age of television.

Second, the imperatives of television as a social institution will have to give way to a freer market in television production. The censorship of "cost per thousand" makes violence the cheapest as well as an otherwise attractive industrial ingredient in the present system of dramatic mass production. The resource base for television will have to be broadened to liberate the institution from total dependence on advertising moneys and purposes. The potential riches of television, and the willingness to pay for a more diversified fare through cable and other means, show that consumers and citizens want a television system more responsive to their needs.

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