Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama

By George Gerbner

Abstract: The cultural transformation of our time stems from the extension of the industrial-technological revolution into the sphere of message-production. The mass production and rapid distribution of messages create new symbolic environments that reflect the structure and functions of the institutions that transmit them. These institutional processes of the mass-production messages short-circuit other networks of social communication and superimpose their own forms of collective consciousness—their own publics—upon other social relationships. The consequences for the quality of life, for the cultivation of human tendencies and outlooks, and for the governing of societies, are far-reaching. Informed policy-making and the valid interpretation of social behavior require systematic indicators of the prevailing climate of the changing symbolic environment. A central aspect of cultural indicators would be the periodic analysis of trends in the composition and structure of message systems cultivating conceptions of life relevant to socialization and public policy. Findings of studies of the portrayal of violence in network television drama illustrate the terms of such analysis, and demonstrate the need for more comprehensive, cumulative, and comparative information on mass-cultural trends and configurations.

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THE Nation has no comprehensive set of statistics reflecting social progress or retrogression," begins the recent Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) report to the President.[1] The report recommended a procedure for the periodic stock-taking of the social health of the nation. Steps in that direction include pending legislation and the growing literature on social and political accounting; the recent White House order setting up a National Goals Research Staff, charged, among other things, with "developing and monitoring social indicators that can reflect the present and future quality of American life, and the direction and rate of its change"; and this issue of THE ANNALS itself.

My purpose is to develop and illustrate a framework for cultural indicators as one aspect of social accounting. Cultural indicators have been alluded to, but have not yet been articulated in policy statements, legislative proposals, or the research literature. I would first like to outline the case for indicators of the mass-produced symbolic environment that I call the common culture. Then I shall describe a central aspect of the framework for such indicators, and illustrate the framework with our study of television violence[2] and related research.

THE CASE FOR CULTURAL INDICATORS

There is no area of significant social policy in which far-reaching decisions are made with as little reliable, systematic, cumulative, and comparative information about the actual state of affairs as in the sphere of the mass production of the common culture. Confused by our own rhetoric of some automatic mechanisms at work in some mythical marketplace of ideas, we are only vaguely aware of the fact that decisive policy-making is going on, and that cultural politics is as much a part of the fabric of modern life as economic, welfare, or military politics.[3] Debates about "censorship" obscure the realities of direction, constraints, and controls in the mass production of messages. Application of formal aesthetic categories derived from other times and places ignore functions, resources, and power at the heart of the cultural process.

We know next to nothing about trends in the composition and structure of mass-produced message systems that govern men's lives and inform men's minds in urbanized societies. We know little more about the institutional processes that compose and structure those message systems. Consequently, much of our high-powered research on how people respond and behave in specific situations is unenlightened by insight into the common cultural context in which and to which they respond.

Historically, we are dealing with a still galloping industrial revolution in methods of producing and distributing messages. The rise of mass communication is a profound change in the management of information, and in the creation of the common symbolic environment that gives public direction and meaning to

[1] U.S., Department of Health, Education and Welfare, *Toward a Social Report* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1969) p. xi.

[2] George Gerbner, Martin Brouwer, Cedric C. Clark and Klaus Krippendorff, "Dimensions of Violence in Television Drama," The Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1969 (hereinafter referred to as the "television violence study"). However, some findings are presented in this paper for the first time.

[3] Governments, Presidents, and, more recently, a Vice-President, usually call attention to this fact when a deep split in economic-military-communications policy-making threatens their ability to cultivate mass support, or at least acquiescence. Any campaign to mobilize a "silent majority" of the "forgotten man" is an attempt to force the media to publicize views that such a campaign expects to elicit.

human activity. The purpose of a scheme of cultural indicators is to monitor those aspects of our system of generating bodies of broadly shared messages that are most amenable—and most relevant—to public policy decisions, and to take the pulse and measure the tempo of their transformations.

Selective habits of participation limit each of us to risky and usually faulty extrapolation about the cultural experience of different or heterogeneous communities. The reliable observation of regularities in large message systems is a specialized enterprise that requires not only methodological sophistication, but also a clear conception of dimensions of analysis and of relevance to investigative purpose. What I have called elsewhere the institutional approach to mass communications research [4] is the basis of such an enterprise. It is the study of technologically mediated message systems and processes as historically new ways of looking at life, as new forms of institutionalized public acculturation, and the broadest common bases of social interaction and policy-formation in modern societies. Such study revolves around problems of message system theory and analysis, institutional process analysis, and the investigation of relationships between message systems, corporate forms and functions, collective image-formation, and public policy. It asks these questions:

What perspectives and relationships are expressed in message systems produced for large and diverse communities? How do these systems vary over time, across cultures, and in different societies? How do media compose and structure these message systems? How is the mass-production and distribution of messages organized, controlled, and managed? What institutional and technological functions and what organizational decision-making processes govern the production and distribution of these message systems? What common assumptions do message systems cultivate over and above those apparent in single or selected messages or individual and selective responses? And, finally, how does the cultivation of these collective assumptions shape the conduct of public affairs (and, of course, vice versa)?

The questions designate three areas of analysis. Study of the composition and structure of large bodies of mass-mediated messages is the *analysis of message systems*. Study of the organizational forms, functions, and decision-making that compose and structure these systems is what I called *institutional process analysis* in mass communications. And study of the relationships between institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate is what we may call *cultivation analysis*.

Social research into the "behavioral effects" of communications might be seen as having concentrated on the last area of studies. Yet, the area of cultivation analysis is perhaps the least developed. The reason is that most "effects" research stemmed from theoretical perspectives that did not consider relevance to the mass-cultural process a principal criterion. From the point of view of cultural indicators, therefore, such research will be inadequate to the task until institutional process and message-system analysis can provide the necessary framework of common terms and the relevant dimensions to be investigated.

Institutional process-analysis has a research base in organization theory and studies of management policy-formation. It is a more focused and limited area of study. But research on the policy proc-

[4] George Gerbner, "An Institutional Approach to Mass Communications Research," in Lee Thayer ed., *Communication: Theory and Research* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1966).

ess in mass communications is scarce.[5] More importantly, such research cannot serve the purposes of cultural indicators until media policies can be related not only to theories of organization and decision-making, but also to specific characteristics of message systems that they shape.

The analysis of message systems is, then, the starting point of research leading to cultural indicators. It is the step that must be taken before the study of the institutional-policy and public-cultivation processes can proceed on coherent terms. The central dimensions of cultural analysis stem, not from intentions or policies or individual cognitions, but from the actually shared messages that mediate public perspectives and provide such common bases for social interaction (both dissent and consensus) as shape the course of public events.

MESSAGE SYSTEM ANALYSIS

The analysis of message systems rests on the conception of the role of communication in human life. Communication is interaction through messages. Messages are specialized events (or aspects of events) that signify other things in enormously varied and creative ways unique to human culture.[6] Social interaction through such symbols is the "humanizing" process of our species. That process creates the symbolic environment from which behavior derives its distinctively human significance. It also cultivates man's notions of the facts and potentials of existence, his orders of priorities and ranges of values, and the clusters of associations among all these dimensions of imagery and imagination.

The terms of our analysis stem from and relate to the dimensions of common consciousness that mass-produced message systems cultivate in large and heterogeneous publics. We have identified these dimensions as message-mediated assumptions about *existence, priorities, values,* and *relationships.* Table 1 summarizes the questions, terms, and measures of analysis relevant to each dimension.

The dimension of assumptions about *existence* deals with the question "What is?," that is, what is available (referred to) in public message systems at all, how frequently, and in what proportions. The availability of shared messages defines the scope of public attention. The measure of *attention,* therefore, indicates the presence, prevalence, rate, complexity, and varying distributions of items, topics, themes, and the like, represented in message systems.

The dimension of priorities raises the question "What is important?" We may use measures of *emphasis* to study the context of relative prominence and the order or degrees of centrality or importance. Measures of attention and emphasis may be combined to indicate, not only the allocation, but also the channeling attention in a message system.

The dimensions of *values* inquires

[5] Some illustrations and the beginnings of a scheme for process analysis are contained in George Gerbner, "Institutional Pressures upon Mass Communicators," in Paul Halmos, ed., *The Sociology of Mass-Media Communicators, Sociological Review* Monographs, no. 13 (University of Keele, England, 1969), pp. 205–248.

[6] An earlier development of this definition and its implications may be found in George Gerbner, "On Content Analysis and Critical Research in Mass Communication," 6 *AV Communication Review* (Spring 1958), pp. 85–108, reprinted in Lewis A. Dexter and David M. White, *People, Society and Mass Communications* (New York: Free Press, 1969), pp. 476–501. The present discussion of message system analysis is a further development of ideas presented in George Gerbner, "Toward 'Cultural Indicators': The Analysis of Mass-Mediated Public Message Systems," in George Gerbner, Ole R. Holsti, Klaus Krippendorff, William J. Paisley and Philip J. Stone, *The Analysis of Communication Content* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1969), pp. 122–132.

TABLE 1—DIMENSIONS, QUESTIONS, TERMS, AND MEASURES OF MESSAGE SYSTEM ANALYSIS

DIMENSIONS	EXISTENCE	PRIORITIES	VALUES	RELATIONSHIPS
Assumptions about:	WHAT IS?	WHAT IS IMPORTANT?	WHAT IS RIGHT OR WRONG, GOOD OR BAD, ETC.?	WHAT IS RELATED TO WHAT, AND HOW?
Questions:	What is available for public attention? How much and how frequently?	In what context or order of importance?	In what light, from what point of view, with what associated judgments?	In what over-all proximal, logical, or causal structure?
Terms and measures of analysis:	ATTENTION Prevalence, rate, complexity, variations	EMPHASIS Ordering, ranking, scaling for prominence, centrality, or intensity	TENDENCY Measures of critical and differential tendency; qualities, traits	STRUCTURE Correlations, clustering; structure of action

into assumptions about right and wrong, good and bad, and other associated qualities. It asks about the point of view from which things are presented, about the characteristics, traits, or connotations attached to different items of reference and emphasis. Measures of *tendency* are used to assess the direction and intensity of value judgments observed in messages.

The dimension of *relationships* focuses on the more complex associations within and among all measures. When we deal with patterns of attention, emphasis, or tendency, instead of only simple distributions, or when we relate the clustering of measures to one another, we illuminate the underlying *structure* of assumptions about existence, priorities, and values represented in message systems.

The four dimensions, then, yield measures of *attention, emphasis, tendency,* and *structure.* I shall illustrate some of the terms of each measure with findings of research on mass media violence, and suggest how such research might be developed to serve the tasks of indicators of the role of cultural production in image-cultivation and policy-formation.

Measures of attention

A mass-produced message system is the result of institutional processes selecting some things to be brought to public attention and ignoring or rejecting others. Measures of attention indicate the presence and distribution of subjects, topics, themes, and the like, selected to compose the system. Knowing something about the distribution of attention over time and across cultures is an elementary measure of the most commonly available fund of raw materials out of which each age and place weaves its own patterns of public imagination and imagery.

Focusing on an issue such as violence, we can ask how prevalent its representation is; what rate per natural context-unit, for example, story or play, it occurs; and how its frequency varies by different categories of analysis within systems and across systems.

The evidence, of course, is scattered, fragmentary, and rarely comparable. In one of the first studies, Edgar Dale found that "crime" prevailed in 84 percent of the movies of the early 1930's,

(an average of 3.9 per picture), and violent death in 39 percent.[7] Our own research noted violence in 66 percent of some three thousand Hollywood movies produced between 1950 and 1961.[8]

Studies of television drama in the early 1950's found that "in over three-quarters of the plays, acts of violence, crime, or aggression occurred,"[9] that violent acts "predominated" in 56 percent or 3.7 per play,[10] and that the hourly rate doubled between 1952 and 1954.[11]

Our television violence study analyzed plays, cartoons, and feature films telecast nationally during study periods representative of 1967 and 1968 network programming. The study found violence portrayed in eight out of every ten plays for both years. The rate of violent episodes was 5.0 per play in 1967 and 4.5 in 1968. An average dramatic program hour had seven, and a cartoon hour, twenty-two, violent episodes. Half of all leading characters committed, and six out of ten suffered, some violence. One in ten became a killer. One in twenty was killed.

Variations by other categories begin to form patterns of life manifest in the world of television drama. The following highlights from the findings of our 1967–1968 television violence study come from measures of attention across such variables as personal and demographic aspects, social environment, place, and time.

- Violence stuns, maims, and kills without much visible "hurt." Suffering was difficult to detect, making violence appear painless, despite the "body count" of about 400 casualties per week or an average of five per violent play.
- When witnesses appear on a scene of violence, they are passive in seven out of ten such episodes. When they are not passive, they are as likely to assist or encourage as to try to prevent violence.
- The "generation gap" looms with a vengeance. One young adult gets killed for every five young killers. One middle-aged character gets killed for every two middle-aged killers. Old people rarely appear in television plays (6 percent of all characters), and even more seldom kill (2 percent of all killers); but two old men were killed for one who was a killer. To look at only killers and their fate; one young killer out of fourteen is himself the fatal victim of violence; one middle-aged killer out of five gets killed; the old man who kills is killed in return.
- Social class, too, makes a difference. Half of all upper- and middle-class characters, but three-quarters of lower-class characters, commit violence. Six out of ten upper- and middle-class characters, but nine out of ten lower-class characters, fall victim to violence. Almost one-third of upper- and middle-class characters escape both violence and victimization; none of the lower-class characters does. When it comes to fatal violence, upper-class killers number 11 percent, middle-class killers, 12 percent, and lower-class killers, 16 percent

[7] Edgar Dale, *The Content of Motion Pictures* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1935), pp. 133–134.

[8] Unpublished research data.

[9] Sidney W. Head, "Television and Social Norms: An Analysis of the Social Content of Television Drama" (PhD. dissertation, New York University, 1953), p. 2.

[10] Sidney W. Head, "Content Analysis of Television Programs," 9 *Quarterly of Film, Radio, and Television*, 1954, pp. 184–185.

[11] H. H. Remmers, *Four Years of New York Television* (Urbana, Ill.: National Association of Educational Broadcasters, 1954), pp. 37–38.

of all characters in their class. Middle-class killers outnumber middle-class killed 3 to 1, but for every upper- and lower-class killer, there is an upper- and lower-class character killed.

- Ethnic and race distinctions are related and equally striking. The violents comprise half of all white American characters, six out of every ten white foreigners, and two-thirds of all nonwhites. The same groups suffer from violence in the same order, with nearly six out of ten whites, but eight out of ten nonwhites falling victim to some violence. Both inflicting and suffering violence themselves were 39 percent of white Americans, 46 percent of white non-Americans, and 60 percent of nonwhites. Escaping both violence and victimization were 35 percent of white Americans, 32 percent of white non-Americans, and only 13 percent of nonwhites. However, the proportion of killers was one out of every five white foreigners, one out of every eight white Americans, and one out of every fifteen nonwhites. There seems to be something like "violent efficiency" at work here, too: one-third of all violent foreign whites and nearly one-fourth of all violent white Americans, but only one-tenth of all violent nonwhites, succeed in killing an opponent. The pattern of fatal victimization also shows that while white American killers outnumbered killed 4 to 1, and white foreigners 3 to 2, for every nonwhite killer there was a nonwhite killed.
- Time and place also affect the patterns of violence and justice implicit in the way things work out in the world of television. Violence was involved in three-fourths of all plays in a contemporary or domestic setting. But it was featured in 98 percent of plays set in the past, every single play set in the future, and 92 percent of all plays depicting foreign lands or people. To look at it another way, the past was nine times as likely to be depicted when there was some violence than when there was none. The future was always violent. The outside world was three times as likely to be violent as nonviolent. And, as we have seen, the violence extracts a higher price—a tooth for a tooth—from its predominantly violent strangers than it does from its violent native whites.

Crude as they are, these patterns begin to lay bare some assumptions cultivated in these message systems. They also begin to give substance to the contention that without a more specific knowledge of these assumptions about the role of violence, research on "effects" may be shallow and misdirected.

Measures of emphasis

"Emphasis" is that aspect of the composition of message systems which establishes a context of priorities of importance or relevance. The distribution of emphases sets up a field of differential appeal in which certain things stand out. Emphasis orders the agenda of public conceptions and discourse cultivated in message systems. Measures of emphasis may be based on indications of size, intensity, or stress, or on the featuring of certain topics or themes as the major points of stories, and are usually expressed in ranks or ratios.

Measures of emphasis are most useful when it is necessary to examine orders of priority channeling or even command-

ing attention independently of terms of prevalence and rate of messages available for attention. For example, in an international study,[12] we found that the ratios of films in which violence was "essential to the plot" to those in which violence was "secondary" was higher in Polish films (2.5) than in United States films (1.3), despite the fact that the prevalence of violent portrayals was higher in the United States films. Yugoslav films with a very high, and Czechoslovak films with a very low, prevalence of violence both yielded the lowest emphasis ratios of six countries (0.8).

Some evidence of trends in emphasis over time comes from television studies. The 1952 television research found violent acts "predominating" in 56 percent of plays analyzed.[13] Our 1967–1968 study found violence integral to the plot (essential for a brief plot description) in 66 percent of the plays in 1967 and 56 percent in 1968. However, when television drama portrayed violence, it emphasized it as an essential plot element in from seven to eight out of every ten plays in both the early 1950's and the late 1960's.

Measures of tendency

The position of an institution (or an individual) in time and space, and in the over-all structure of social relations, enters into the approach, point of view, or direction from which that institution or individual presents aspects of existence. The investigation of "tendency" deals with the explicit or contextual value judgments and other qualities that such vantage points impart to message systems.

[12] Based on research data for George Gerbner, "The Film Hero: A Cross-Cultural Study," University of Minnesota Journalism Monographs, no. 13 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969).

[13] Head, "Television and Social Norms."

The broadest over-all dimension of judgment is a summary evaluation of the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness, of things. A measure of the favorable-unfavorable associations expressed in message systems may be called "critical tendency." It is based primarily on whether a subject or topic appears in a supportive or critical context. But value judgment is, of course, multidimensional. Measures of "differential tendency" can be used which indicate directionality of judgment in many different dimensions.

In fiction and drama, tendency may be implicit in justifications for action, consequences of action, and the characterization of persons assigned different roles and fates. The international film study cited above found that principal characters in all countries' films resorted to violence for defense, protection, and other sanctioned or legal ends from over two to more than four times as frequently as for illegal or immoral ends. But illegal and immoral reasons for violence were portrayed twice or more as frequently in the West as in Eastern Europe. The ratio of the tendency to commit "socially sanctioned" violence versus antisocial violence was 2.5 in French films, 2.6 in United States films, 3.5 in Italian films, 3.8 in Czechoslovak films, 4.1 in Yugoslav films, and 4.4 in Polish films. (The higher the ratio, the lower the proportion of antisocial violence.)

The 1967–1968 television study traced the tendency to present violence as serious, or as slapstick or "just for fun." Four-fifths of all violent episodes (including comedy) were judged "serious." The proportion of "serious" episodes declined from 87 percent of all violent scenes in 1967 to 74 percent in 1968.

The more complex judgments inherent in the world of dramatic violence can be illuminated by combining dimensions again to weave fuller patterns of life.

Measures of structure

Systematic measurement of patterns of relationships requires the analysis of correlations or clusters among measures. Such methods depend on the development of sophisticated and flexible computer programs that can reveal complex interrelations of different types of data. I am limited to the few relatively simple examples available to illustrate some possibilities. These examples, from the 1967–1968 television violence study, involve certain aspects of purpose, characterization, role, and fate.

- Most violence is interpersonal and at close range, but relatively impersonal. Strangers assault each other for reasons of private gain, power, or duty. In a world of specialized relationships, violence is one more specialty that rarely involves intimates and seldom stems from great emotion or from fighting for a noble cause.
- Happy are the good guys and unhappy the bad (at least in the end). Good guys *initiate* as much violence as bad guys, but hurt less and kill less. Good guys *suffer* more from violence, but heroes never die. Bad guys get hurt less than good guys, but, of course, they lose out in the end.
- Half of all killers are good guys who reach a happy end in the stories.

If virtue suffers more than evil, the ultimately happy hero must be more decisive and efficient to triumph in the end. "Personality-differential" scales used to measure the intensity of selected character traits support that inference, and add more dimensions to the structure of judgments.

Figure 1 charts the mean scores of all violent characters, all killers, and all those who commit no violence, on scales found to be reliably used by analysts on the television violence study. Aside from the sex difference which results, in part, from the larger proportion of women among nonviolents, the traits that distinguish nonviolents from violents and killers are "usualness," efficiency, attractiveness, emotionality, and logic. Nonviolents are more usual, less efficient, more emotional, and less logical than violents. Killers are the most efficient and the least emotional. (We shall come to "attractiveness" later.)

Now let us see how a happy fate—practically identical with virtue— affects the portrayals. Figure 2 compares violents and nonviolents by fate. The greatest difference, aside from violence itself, is that the "happies" are attractive whether violent or not. The "unhappies" are repulsive when violent.

Violence does not mar, nor nonviolence improve, the attraction of the happy hero. But violence does appear to have logic on its side. And the key to violent happiness is efficiency. Let us take a closer look.

Attractive characters reach a happy end, (or vice versa) whether violent or not. Attractive, happy, and violent characters are also the most logical, but the repulsive, unhappy, violent characters are nearly equally logical. Thus, all violents are more logical than all nonviolents. Nonviolents—whether happy or unhappy—are more emotional and intuitive than violents. Unhappy nonviolents are also more irrational. Cool logic is all on the side of violence.

Violence with a happy ending, furthermore, is a matter of efficiency. Superior efficiency separates happy violents from all others. Efficient, cool logic is the unbeatable combination that makes for the happy violent hero. Characters can remain happy and lack efficiency only if nonviolent. Violent

heroes must be efficient to win, while nonviolent heroes may, and all villains (a little older than the rest), *must* bungle the job.

Further confirmation comes from a comparison of happy and unhappy killers, and their, naturally, unhappy victims. (See Figure 3.) Unhappy killers and killed present similar profiles because their numbers overlap; half of the unhappy killers are themselves killed.

The happy killers stand out in manliness and attractiveness; they are heroes. The happy killers are "first among equals" in rational and unemotional logic, for they, too, are killers. But the happy killers are the most distinguished in the quality they must possess to win, even more than all violent heroes: efficiency.

Unhappy killers and all victims present, by comparison, an image of repulsive bunglers. The victims of fatal violence, half of them killers but some of them innocents themselves, are also the oldest and least masculine. Otherwise they are almost as repulsive and bungling as are those of their killers who come to an unhappy end.

Cool efficiency, and, to a lesser extent, manliness and youth, appear to be the chief correlates of success and virtue in a fairly impersonal, self-seeking, and specialized structure of violent action.

FIGURE 1—PERSONALITY PROFILES OF CHARACTERS BY VIOLENCE-RELATED ROLES IN TELEVISION DRAMA

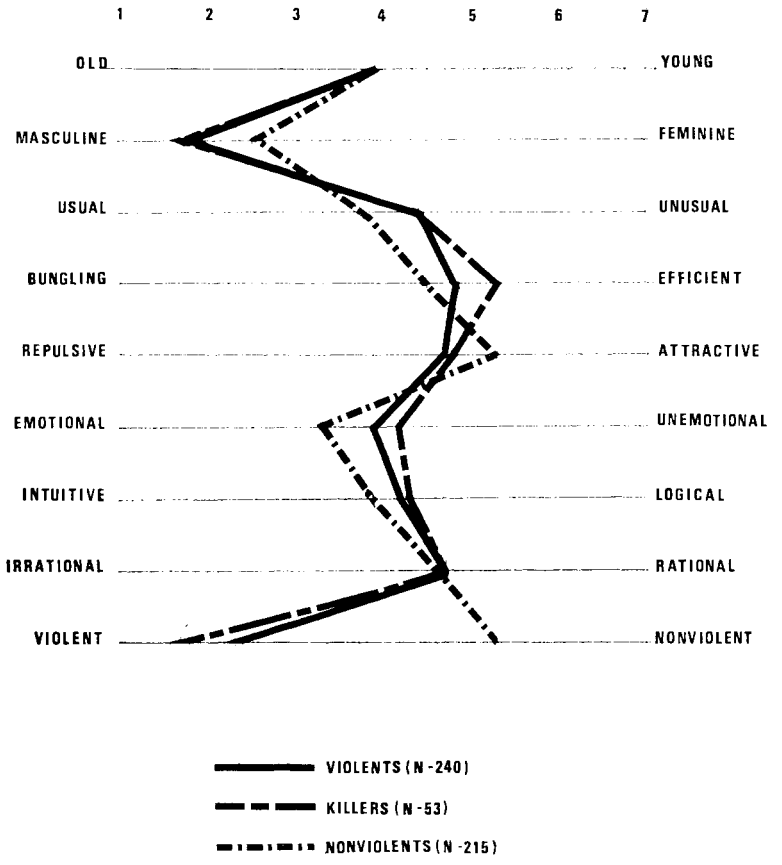
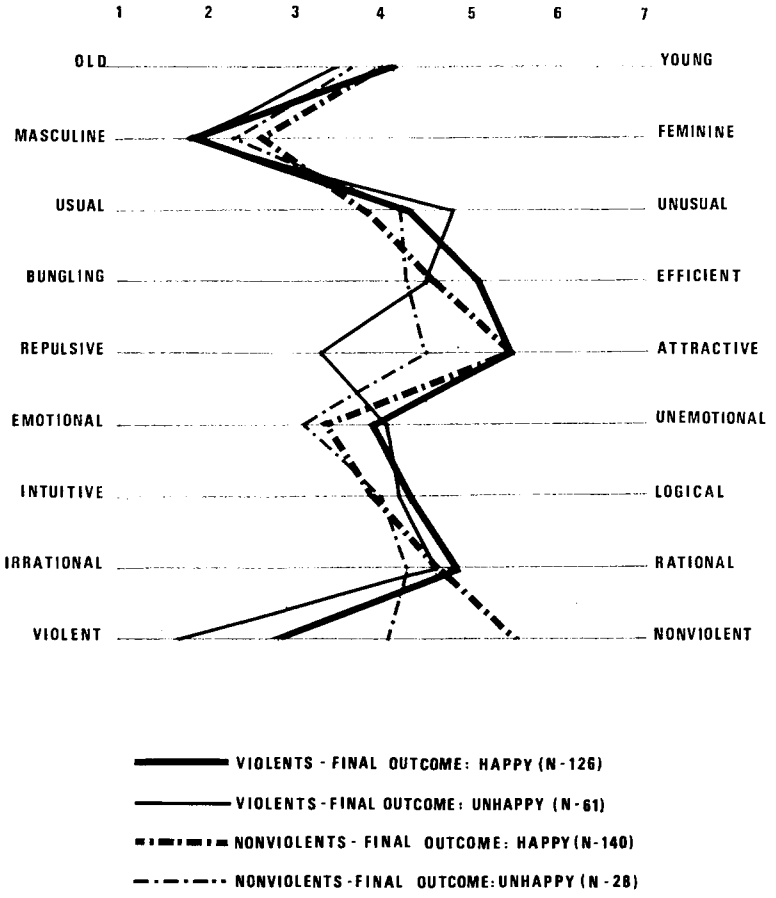


FIGURE 2—PERSONALITY PROFILES OF CHARACTERS BY FINAL OUTCOME



There is a need for more sensitive and comprehensive indicators of the structure of assumptions cultivated in public-message systems than we have yet been able to develop. What should they encompass? What will they show? I would like to conclude with some suggestions about the potentials and limitations of such development.

POTENTIALS AND LIMITATIONS

Understanding the structure of cultivation is especially necessary when the focus of attention is a complex issue of life or policy. Violence, for example, is not a single or simple dimension of behavior. Much of it is not a problem of behavior at all, in the sense of violent motion. It is equally a question of public assumptions about the role of force and the distribution of justice; it is also a problem of shared expectations of the kinds and effects of violence that "we" expect from different types of "others." Violence involves resistance to or acquiescence in its private and public uses; support for or opposition to policies related to its use; and other responses to its distant, as well as to its nearby, manifestations.

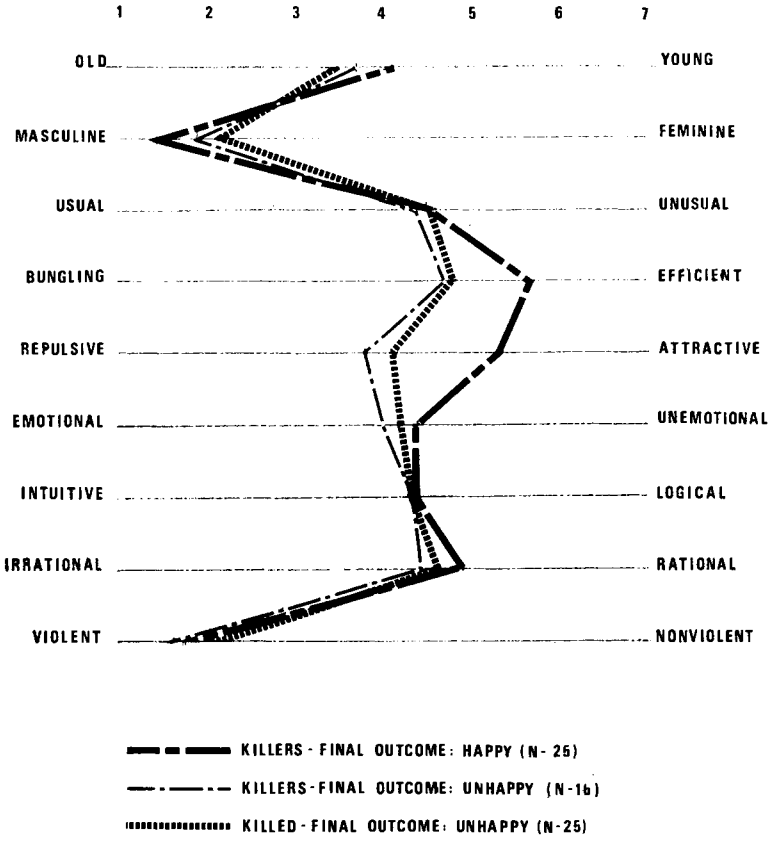
These are culturally learned assump-

tions and expectations. Indicators of public-message systems give us a basis for judging the role of cultural production in their cultivation. Such indicators can also help place cultural policy in perspective. "How much violence should there be on television?" is a shallow question, useful mainly for administrative purposes. If used alone, it can only lead to a new rating game in which networks compete for the lowest score, regardless of its meaning.

"What kinds of violence, what for, and in what contexts?" are the key issues. Violence is a symptom of irreconciled conflict, destruction, hurt, and waste. It is, in a sense, the opposite of communication. It negates the most uniquely human capacity of our species, the capacity to interact and even collide creatively through symbols and messages. Symbolic representation of violence is, therefore, a vital function of information and art in their illumination of its real-life manifestations and consequences.

Institutional compulsions to present life in salable packages exploit existing assumptions about violence. Our television study found that portrayals of violence mirror, rather than illuminate, our society's prejudices. Cultural policies can expose the role of violence or can use its images as instruments of that very negation of humanity that it represents. Indicators of the structure

FIGURE 3—PERSONALITY PROFILES OF "KILLERS" AND "KILLED"



of assumptions imbedded in our message systems can help make these distinctions. They can also reveal trends in attention, emphasis, tendency, and structure, and their relationship to cultural policy.

I have used the issue of violence to illustrate aspects of the case, and of a scheme, for cultural indicators. But representations of any aspect of life can best be seen in the context of others, across conventional distinctions of media or modes of representation, and against the background of changes in time and place. Sources of information should range from existing indices and guides (often compiled for reference but usable as trend-indicators) to regular monitoring of the massive flow of messages and images. The accounting should begin with the message systems most broadly shared by the most heterogeneous publics. Cutting across all these sources, media, modes, and forms should be the common terms and categories of analysis. These should include categories as comparable as possible to those studied before and to those in other cultures, but which are also sensitive to new and changing issues of public policy. They should survey the history, geography, and demography of the symbolic worlds produced for common vicarious experience and learning. Interpersonal and group relationships portrayed in these message systems should be studied. Themes of nature, science, politics, law, crime, business, education, art, illness and health, peace and war, and sex, love, and friendship, as well as conflict and violence, should be analyzed. Roles, traits, goals, values, and fates of characters engaged in dramatic action should be related to the symbolic worlds in which they act and the issues with which they grapple.

The analysis of message systems can provide a framework in which comprehensive, coherent, cumulative, and comparative information can be systematically assembled and periodically reported. Indicators relevant to specific problems or policies can then be seen in the context of the entire structure of assumptions cultivated at a particular time and place.

These indicators will not necessarily tell us what people think or do. But they will tell us what most people think or do something *about* and in *common,* and suggest reasons why. They will tell us much about the shared representations of life, the issues, the prevailing points of view that capture public attention, occupy people's time, and animate their imagination. They will help to understand, judge, and shape more intelligently the changing symbolic climate that affects *all* we think and do. We can then inquire into who thinks and does what, how, and why in sharper awareness of the currents that tug and pull us all.