Exploring TV's hold on viewers

By GEORGE GERBNER

An important government report on television, three years in the making, was about to be released two weeks ago. But a funny thing happened on the way to the release: The Washington Post broke the story in a front-page item headlined *Report Links TV Violence to Aggression.*

The "scoop" made similar headlines over the country and was prominently featured on radio and television. The report itself, when finally distributed, was no longer newsworthy. The initial news break structured subsequent coverage and public discussion of the issue.

The problem is that while The Post story was not false, it reversed the emphasis and defeated the intent of the report. The intent was to reflect the broad and diverse scientific scrutiny to which television had been subjected since the last Surgeon General's report in 1972, and to distill from that research policy implications for our citizens' mental and physical health, conceptual development, emotional functioning, imagination and creativity, family and social relationships, reading and learning abilities and even intelligence, as well as violence. All fundamental aspects of life and human development addressed in the report fell victim to the media's obsession with violence — an ironic twist in press coverage attributing that obsession to television.

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I am interested in a fair and full public consideration of the important issues raised in the report. Violence is one of them but not the only or even necessarily the main issue. I want to note a few other issues emphasized in the report (and in our own research) that I believe are of concern to all Americans.

But first a little background. Over 10 years ago, the U.S. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee commissioned a series of studies (including our own "violence profile") and found evidence of a causal relationship between screen violence and aggressive tendencies. But the cautious and tentative scientific language of the original Surgeon General's report led The New York Times to break the story with a headline disclaiming such connection. Then, as now, the initial story in a "prestige paper" set the tone of subsequent coverage and neutralized the impact of the report and its findings. The most significant effect was that the controversy that ensued stimulated more sustained and diversified research. Our own research broadened out to encompass television's role as a central source of conceptions of life and society in our culture.

The "update" volumes now completed survey, summarize and evaluate that research. They are entitled "Television and Behavior: 10 Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the '80s."

Of the 10 chapters of the summary report, only Chapter IV deals with violence, and even that attempts to broaden and make more realistic the usual terms of discourse. The most striking new conclusions of the report, and certainly ones in which our own research was deeply involved, are in the areas of health and learning.

Television is the new frontier in health promotion and disease prevention. Few people are aware of the fact that inadequate medical care accounts for only 10 per cent of preventable deaths in the United States. The majority are due to culturally sustained behaviors, mostly patterns of eating, drinking, smoking, driving and other aspects of safety. Television is by far the largest single common daily source of images and messages about all those — and most other — familiar behavior patterns.

The report integrates research on the health promotion and disease prevention potentials of television. It also describes the risks to good nutrition and safety habits viewers encounter in living countless hours in the dramatic world of television. Our own research suggests that viewing cultivates a relative sense of complacency about health (look at those slim and beautiful people grabbing snacks on the run and gulping drinks to cope with tension several times each program hour!) but an almost mystical belief in the curative powers of medical science (those magnificent TV doctors!). Can it be that TV sets viewers up for unrealistic expectations and subse-

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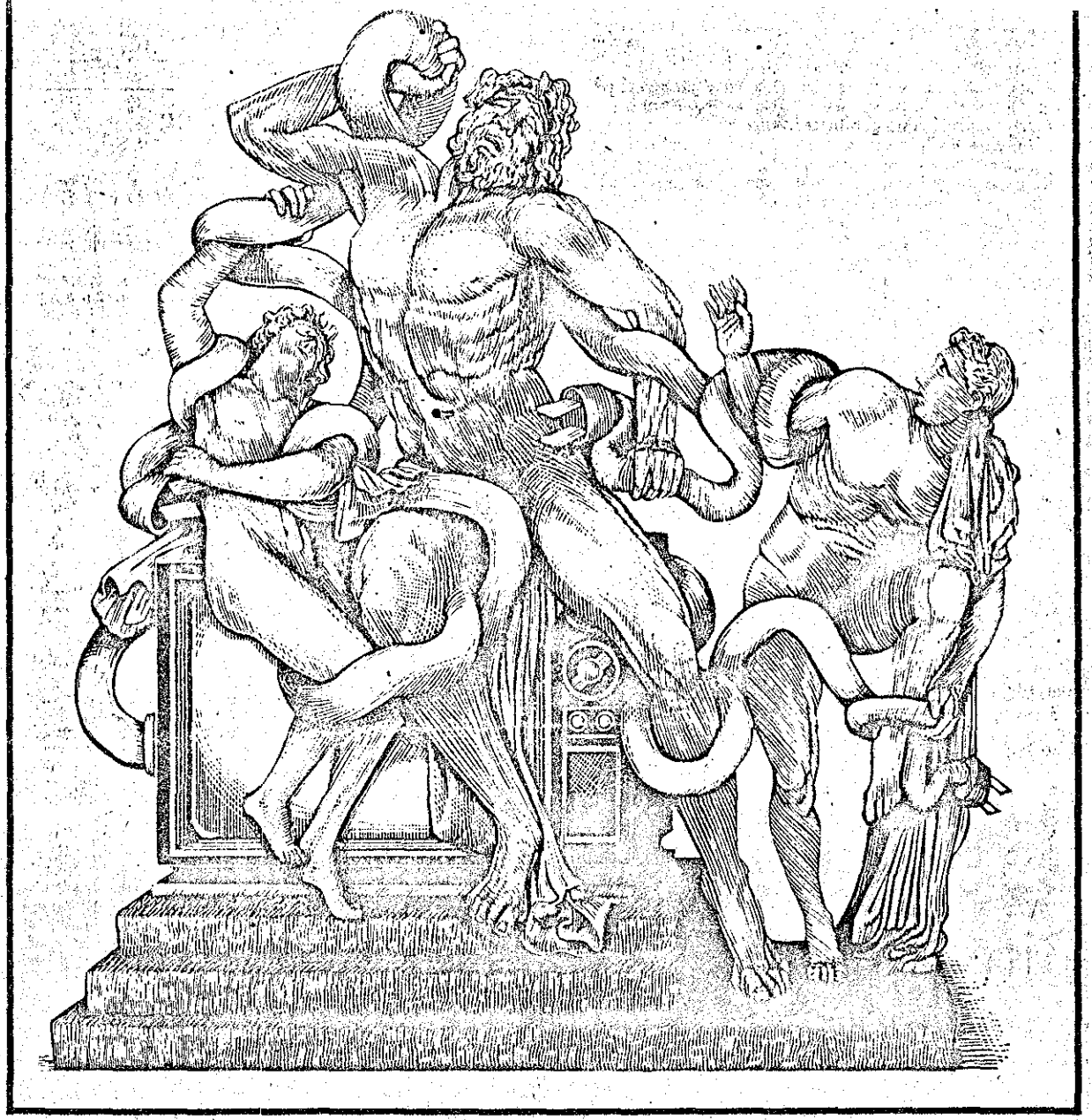

KENT BARTON / Miami Herald Staff — AFTER THE LAOCOON IN THE VATICAN

George Gerbner is professor of communications at and dean of The Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. He was also a member of the consultant advisory committee guiding the preparation of the National Institute of Mental Health report on "Television and Behavior," and a member of the Cultural Indicators research team contributing to the report, along with Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli of Penn's Annenberg School. He wrote this article for The Herald.

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quent frustration and even litigation? (That is the conclusion we reach in a separate article in the Oct. 8, 1981, issue of The New England Journal of Medicine.) At any rate, I believe that a little enlightenment in the more sensible portrayal of eating, drinking, seatbelt use, etc. on TV programs, achieved at no cost to dramatic values and ratings, can save more lives in the long run than any reduction in violence. (Which is not to say that such reduction, often promised but rarely — if ever — really delivered, might not also be beneficial.)

Television is the new frontier not only in the battle for better health but also for better learning. It is the universal curriculum of children, parents and grandparents alike. The report interprets research on its

Beyond television violence

significance for reading, school achievement, educational aspirations and even intelligence. Briefly, viewing tends to be associated with generally lower scores, especially for those from the more affluent and better educated homes. However, for some groups of kids from poorer homes, more viewing goes with higher scores. This is an example of the theory of "mainstreaming" developed in our own research and noted in the report: Television seems to cultivate its own relatively homogeneous and common "mainstream" that absorbs otherwise divergent group characteristics. (For a detailed development and application to political orientations, see the current issue of the Journal of Communication.) Again, these implications for learning and education are many times more persuasive (if not as dramatic) as the implications for inciting violence.

The report does deal with the violence issue, but attempts to broaden and even transform the usual terms of that issue. As the press coverage emphasized, the evidence of a causal link between televised violence and aggression seems overwhelming. But the report goes on to note the other and much more pervasive side of the violence coin: fear of victimization. The report concludes its summary of the research on violence and aggression: "Thus . . . people who view a great deal of television — and who consequently see a great deal of violence — are more likely to view the world as a mean and scary place. These heavy viewers also exhibit more fear, mistrust and apprehension than do light viewers . . . . This finding may ultimately be of more significance than the direct relationship between televised violence and aggression."

There is much food for thought here for the television industry and the public alike. The industry can learn what it is doing right and how to respond to unjustified criticism more effectively than its self-serving PR is doing now. Members of the public and citizens groups can find in this report a basis for judgment and action that did not exist before. All readers can use the report to overcome the rigid, simplistic, one-dimensional reactions typical of the coverage of reports on television.

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(As government reports are often hard to get and quickly go out of print, any reader interested in obtaining a copy can write to me at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104, and I will send information on how to obtain it.)