Second Thoughts

Assessing television's try for a noncombat zone, by George Gerbner

The Family Hour and Beyond

The first official season of "family viewing" on prime-time television is over. The facts of the case (even if not all the verdicts) are in. We can now reflect on what it all might mean.

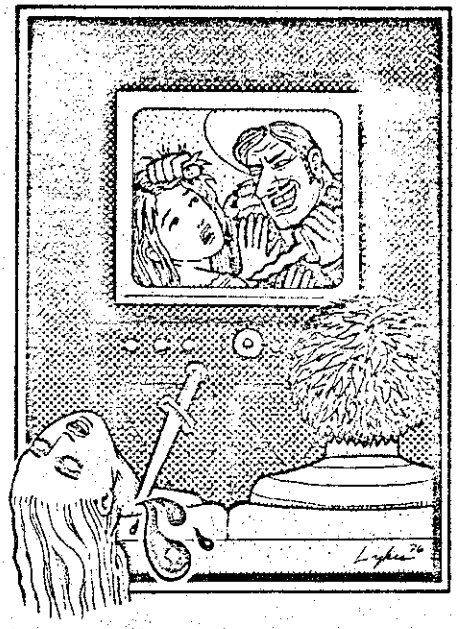
The concept of a "family viewing" period arose in late 1974. It was a result of congressional prodding, FCC chairman Richard E. Wiley's concern and CBS president Arthur Taylor's initiative. Somebody had to do something to follow up the conclusion former-Surgeon General Jesse L. Steinfeld reached, on the basis of extensive investigations, before the Pastore Senate Subcommittee: "It is clear to me," Steinfeld said, "that the causal relationship between televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and remedial action."

The concept was eventually expressed as an addition to the Code of the National Association of Broadcasters: "Entertainment programming inappropriate for viewing by a general family audience should not be broadcast during the first hour of network entertainment programming in prime time and in the immediately preceding hour."

The rule, riddled with exceptions and embroiled in controversy, went into effect last fall. *Variety*'s view of the result was summed up in its April 21, 1976, headline: Tepid TV Season Ends In Turbulence.

I will leave it to TV critics to say whether the past season was any more tepid than others. (I cannot fail to observe, however, that in the intangible aspects of programming—as of my own business of education—there is an irresistible tendency to blame one's failures on whatever the current annoyance or limitation might be). The "turbulence" included high executive heads rolling and faces changing because of fractional rating-point differences among competing networks, and a lawsuit by Hollywood guilds and Norman ("All in the Family") Lear against everyone involved in the family viewing plot.

Actually, the Family Hour worked—sort of. The best data we have comes from our long-range study of network dramatic programming and viewers' conceptions of social reality (reported in full in the Spring 1976 issue of the quarterly *Journal of Communication*). From 8 P.M. to 9 P.M. (EST)—which is



the only dramatic program period involved for most viewers—the Violence Index dipped from 146 in the fall of 1974 to 101 in the fall of 1975. Whether a slight rise to 108 this spring represents a reversal of this trend or just random fluctuation we cannot yet tell. (The Violence Index is based on a sample week's detailed observations and the cumulative addition of the percent of programs containing any violence, the percent of characters involved in violence and the rate of violent incidents per program and per hour).

There are, however, many confounding factors. First, the biggest drop was in anticipation of the Family Hour, between the 1974 and 1975 seasons, rather than since its inauguration. Secondly, only CBS, proud parent of the family viewing concept, consistently followed the rule and reduced its level of violence each season. Third, a year before Family Hour, the Violence Index after 9 P.M. rose dramatically and pretty much stayed there after the Family Hour went into effect. Fourth, violence in weekend daytime (children's) programming also rose from 194 in fall 1974 to 221 in fall 1975 and declined only to 200 this past spring.

That means that this past spring five out of every 10 Family Hour programs, eight out of 10 late evening programs and nine out of every 10 weekend children's programs contained some violence. The rate of violent incidents was three per program before 9 P.M. (EST), seven per program after 9 P.M. and four per weekend children's program. Little over three of 10 Family Hour characters were involved in violence, and there was very little killing. After 9 o'clock, seven of every 10 characters were involved in some violence, and over two in 10 were involved in killing. On children's weekend programs, eight in every 10 characters were involved in some violence, but there was practically no killing.

Basically, there seems to have been a redistribution of violence from the Family Hour to other hours, including children's hours, at least until the season just passed. Now, thanks largely to CBS, we are beginning to see a slight overall decline. The Violence Index for all prime-time and weekend daytime programming dipped from 180 last fall to 174 this past spring. Again, it is unclear if this is an insignificant fluctuation or the beginning of a trend.

But what does it mean? Our results to date show that violence in video (as in any storytelling) demonstrates how power works in society: who can—and who cannot—get away with what. Experience in the world of TV drama teaches regular viewers many of their assumptions about the relative risks in life. When you see a fight on television, you do not call the police or an ambulance; you absorb and confirm a sense of relative powers and risks.

Obviously, a few points' difference on the Violence Index does not necessarily transform the structure of symbolic action. In fact, our measures of that structure, called Risk Ratios, proved to be remarkably stable over the years. For example, for every violent male, there were 1.19 male victims. For every violent female, there were 1.32 female victims; for every violent young woman, there were 1.67 young women victims. Old, poor and black women mostly appeared as victims. Clearly, the structure of dramatic action on television is rooted in—and thus perpetuates—the pecking order of society. A change in the rate of victimization may be even more significant than a dip in the Violence Index.

The Family Hour should be seen as a gesture of recognition by both broadcasters and the FCC of a growing citizen and congressional concern about the video's power and accountability. Behind the moves and countermoves is a struggle for influence over a massive and centralized medium that has a relationship with the state that only the church enjoyed in earlier times.

Illustration by John Lykes

The lawsuit against the Family Hour strikes at the heart of broadcaster self-regulation, which is the only present alternative to stringent government regulation. In fact, the litigation may result in a clearer definition of the industry's accountability to the public and liability under the antitrust laws.

The charge that the Family Hour thwarts creative impulses and leads to bland programming is disingenuous. Timidity and the compulsion to please the largest array of tastes at the least cost are built into the commercial formula that rules broadcasting. Mechanical and gratuitous violence itself results from the limiting effects of rule by "cost per thousand" and has never been the key to popular or diversified programming. Breaking up that formula may be the best thing that can happen to creative impulses on television.

The greater promise of the Family Hour concept rests on taking a positive approach. The largest and the most heterogenous audience watching in the early evening deserves the richest fare. Neither the tyranny of "cost per thousand" nor the stultifying and prejudicial cult of violence should be allowed to impoverish it. If advertising budgets are inadequate, a fee on TV sets or an extra dollar on the income tax form (as for election campaigns) or some other means of resource-allocation should be found to broaden the financial base and thus improve both the quality and diversity of the greatest continuous common cultural experience of the largest group of people ever reached by any system of messages in history.

The same concern for richness and diversity should also spread to other parts of the schedule, especially to the part that trade papers aptly call the Kidvid Ghetto, and to the formal parts of our enculturation system such as schools and colleges. We need a fresh approach to the liberal arts to revive their prime purpose, which is to liberate the individual from unwitting dependence upon the immediate cultural environment. That environment today consists mostly of television. An analytical and critical approach toward television thus becomes a vital part of the new liberal arts. If the concept of the Family Hour can become even the first faltering step toward a more self-conscious cultural policy and viewer perspective, it will have been worth all the turbulence. ■

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