THE POLITICS OF MEDIA VIOLENCE: SOME REFLECTIONS

By
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Humankind has had more bloodthirsty eras but none as filled with *images* of violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive invasion of colorful 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 police states. Wholesale violations of human rights keep Amnesty International busy which makes massacres and genocide 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 (which may be a dubious claim).

But what if it did something else, something perhaps even more intimidating and serviceable? And what if its apparent audio-visual realism, stable formulas, steady flow, and critical mass represents a change in the symbolic life-blood of human development that is without precedent?

Audience appeal and just plain broadcaster greed are also said to play a part in the prevalence of violence on television. But neither these nor historical rationalizations can fully explain, let alone justify, drenching every home with graphic scenes of expertly choreographed brutality.

The pervasive symbolic overkill is not without social and institutional costs. Its persistence, despite the risks it entails, the price it extracts and the marginal profits, if any, it nets, requires more than the conventional explanations. Doing justice to its global challenge requires more than the usual public rituals.

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Charges of speech corrupting the young and innocent have been heard in the Western world at least since the time of Socrates. The rise of print, the spread of media to the "lower" classes, and every new extension to those presumed to be more vulnerable than their "elders and betters" sent the charge echoing through ruling circles and the academy.

Cheap literature in the late 19th century was blamed for making workers lazy and indolent. In his *Ladies Guide*

published in 1882 a J. H. Kellogg railed against the "pernicious habit of reading fiction which, once thoroughly fixed, becomes as inveterate as the use of liquor or opium" and "is one of the greatest causes of uterine disease." Immorality and violence in comics and movies generated new fears, codes, regulations, and the first large-scale media research project, the Payne Fund Studies.

The rise of television in the United States coincided with post-World War II social ferment and concern about juvenile delinquency, crime, and general unrest. A series of Congressional hearings heard the traditional charges and denials of media violence focusing on television for the first time. Subsequent hearings, commissions, and reports energized citizens' movements for greater public participation in broadcasting, and provoked a fierce backlash. The ensuing debacle paved the way for the great retreat of the 1980s.

The received arguments of the popular culture debate failed to illuminate the new problems of the television age. A global sea-change in the symbolic environment has overtaken the old parochial formulation of the issues. The collapse of the reform movement exposed the bankruptcy of the traditional terms and tactics of the debate.

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Violence is a legitimate and necessary feature of cultural expression balancing deadly conflict and compulsion against tragic costs. Even catering to morbid and other pathological fascinations may have its poetic or commercial license. The historically limited, individually crafted and selectively used symbolic misanthropy of the past is not the issue today. All that has been swamped by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly-line, saturating the mainstream of our common culture.

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

The incremental profits on manufacturing, inserting, and exporting such a troubling commodity (as distinct from other dramatic qualities of programs) is hardly worth its human and institutional risks and costs. Most highly rated programs are non-violent. Using "sex and violence" appeals in program promotion has little effect on ratings (Williams, 1989). Though economies of scale in cheaply produced

violence formulas may have some small financial advantages to program producers, there is no general correlation between violence and the ratings of comparable programs 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 lawlessness? Why would they suffer public and legislative criticism and face international condemnation -- unless the essential balance of institutional costs and benefits did tip, however precariously, to the positive side?

James D. Halloran suggested an answer when he wrote in 1977 that the conventional approach to media violence, focusing on imitation and incitation as major causes of criminal violence, misses the point. His own research on protest demonstrations showed that in focusing on even trivial or irrelevant violence, the media achieve certain "positive" values; positive, that is from their own standpoint although not necessarily from the standpoint of those seeking reform.

The only "positive" value equal to that of profits for commercials institutions is, of course, power. Politics is the art of getting, holding and wielding or catering to it. Violence is its cheapest and clearest symbolic expression.

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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 life that demonstration is costly, risky, and disruptive. In story-telling, it is usually clear, compelling, and instructive. Depictions of violence thus have important social functions. They 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 punished. They display society's pecking order and show how the social order deals with attempts to subvert it. The ability to define violence and project its lessons is arguably the single most essential requirement for social control.

Media violence is a political scenario on several levels. As a symbolic exercise, it is a demonstration of the distribution of power. As a subject of media research, it has been a source of funding, supplying ammunition for various positions in a debate purportedly about violence but really about media control. The media themselves shape and manipulate the terms of the debate. And legislators milk it as long as there is political juice in it.

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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 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, relating the analysis of television content to a variety of viewer conceptions.

The Task Force Report by Baker and Ball (1969) presented our content 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. The risks of life in prime time are not evenly distributed. When involved in violent encounters, women and minorities are more likely to become their victims.

Only the frequency findings, accompanied by charges and denials of violent imitation and incitation, were reported in mainstream media. 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.

A Scientific Advisory Committee to the United States Surgeon General found indications of a causal relation between violence on television and "aggressive behavior" 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) The report noted 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, which was the source of these conclusions (see Gerbner, at al., 1986a,b), also found that these consequences are not necessarily identical for all groups. They tend to erode traditional differences over time so that the perspectives of heavy viewers of otherwise divergent groups are closer to each other than are the perspectiveas of light viewers.

Subsequent research confirmed, refined, and extended these findings into other areas of television "cultivation." (See Morgan and Signorielli, 1990.) These studies and their implications represent a new approach to media violence effects research.

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Research on the consequences of exposure to mass-mediated violence has a long and involved history. Most of it focused on limited aspects of the complex scenario. It has been motivated (and dominated) by charges of individual imitation, incitation, brutalization, or subversion. 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 organized and systemic, is tenuous, to say the least. It can even be argued that, on one hand, too much pugnacity may mess up coolly conceived and well-planned violence, and, on the other, too little make too many submit too meekly to exploitation, injustice, indignity, and intimidation.

Approaches that focus only on aggression and lawlessness view violence from the enforcement point of view. Their critical edge represents media (and other) institutional interests. They distract attention from wholesale official violence and state terrorism, from the disproportionate victimization of young people, women and minorities, and from demographic and social conditions most closely related to actual violence and crime. And they fail to take into account the crucial difference between violence on television and on all other media.

Universal exposure to televised images of violence goes on from cradle to grave. Conventional research concentrations on imitation alone, selective exposure, before-and-after exposure attitude change, viewer preferences, and the recurrent notion of "powerful" audiences miss the essential problem of television culture and its cultivation of conceptions about social relationships in deadly conflict.

Seldom asked and rarely publicized are broader research questions of media policy. They focus on the implicit message of open season on the "different" and the "deviant." They deal with victimization and the consequences of control, as well as with aggression. The key question in the new approach is not what "causes" most violence and crime, as that goes far beyond media. It is what contributions does constant exposure to particular scenarios of violence and terror make to different groups' conceptions of their own risks and vulnerabilities.

These questions do not fit the typical media effects research mold or media violence story. On the contrary, they expose their assumptions and challenge their social and political functions.

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Television viewing is a time-bound and relatively non-selective activity. Prime time, when most people watch television, and children's programs have been found to have the highest frequencies of violent representations.

Of course, there are many other elements in televised story-telling. And 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 program. The over-arching dramatic messages and images found in many programs tend to cultivate common conceptions most relevant to public policy, which is my focus. Violence is probably the most vivid and prominent of these hard-to-avoid presentations. . Signorielli's (1986) analysis shows that the program mix is such that the average viewer has little opportunity to avoid frequently recurring patterns such as violence. Large audiences watch violent programs scheduled in time periods when large audiences watch television.

The world of prime time is cast for its favorite 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 transnational conglomerates who have something to sell, as well as to tell, and can tell it all the time.

The moderate viewer of prime time sees every week an average of 21 criminals (domestic and foreign) arrayed against an army of 41 public and private law enforcers. There are 14 doctors, 6 nurses, 6 lawyers, and 2 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 3 hours a day (more than half the people) absorb much more.

The violence and terror we see on television bears little or no relationship to their actual occurrence. Neither their frequency nor their nature resembles trends in crime statistics. Rather, they follow marketing formulas that call for injecting relatively cheap dramatic ingredients into otherwise often dull "action programs." But the action goes far beyond markets.

Our analysis has found that exposure to violence-laden television cultivates an exaggerated sense of insecurity and mistrust, and anxiety about the mean world seen on television. Furthermore, the sense of vulnerability and dependence imposing its heaviest burdens on women and minorities.

These are highly exploitable sentiments. They contribute to the irresistibility of punitive and vindictive political slogans ranging from "lenient judges" to capital punishment presumably to enhance security. They lend themselves to the political appeal of "wars" on crime, terrorism and drugs that heighten repression but fail to address root causes.

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Typical publicity deals with threats media violence might pose to the social order. Legislative attempts are similarly oriented. Focusing on potential threats obscures the symbolic functions and utility of media violence to the existing structure of power.

Rowland (1983) ascribes political motives to the choice of media violence research in the first place. The changes brought about by television after World War II reenergized the debate about the impact of modern communications, he wrote. As the television industry had no concrete obligation to fulfill any responsibility but the commercial, it had everything to gain from reducing its accountability for other effects. The political establishment needed leverage to use in dealing with the rising political power of television.

The most promising approaches were those that confronted typical charges and appealed to popular fears but formulated problems in limited and easily controlled ways; that set up straw men to be knocked down; and that, while anxiety-provoking and emotionally arousing, and thus politically attractive, would not be likely to lead to any provocative legislative action. If, in addition, they could cater to public insecurities and mobilize support for defense of "law and order," so much the better. The ideal candidate fulfilling these criteria was television violence research.

Riding the wave of citizen activism and reformist sentiment, 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 of both the incidence of violence and an indication of what some 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 usual law-and-order question: "Does it lead to violent behavior?"

The hearings were, of course, pure theater. Research testimony was used to extract public promises from network executives in exchange for less visible deals in more concrete areas of broadcaster interest, such as licensing. Having served its political purpose, the actual meaning and implications of the research, or the actual performance of the networks, was of little importance.

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One notable exception occurred in the late 1970s at the height of the citizens' reform movement. A decade of commissions, research reports and committee hearings had produced nothing. 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 codes of broadcast standards. Not even a committee report and recommendation, let alone legislation, attempted to address the policies imposing the violence formula.

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. It was the first time that a committee even attempted to write a report. 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 lose. The National Association of Broadcasters, one of the most powerful Washington lobbies, declared war on the committee. Local broadcasters contacted campaign contributors in home districts. The 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 a broadcast 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.

When the network-dictated draft came to a vote, members of the full committee (including those who had never attended hearings) were mobilized. The watered-down version passed by one vote. The press featured it as the "anti-violence" report. The blistering minority report of the Young Turks received no attention.

The surrender was in vain. The rewrite bill was still scuttled. Van Deerlin was defeated in the next election. The broadcast reform movement collapsed. Foundation support for citizen action dried up. Advocates for the public interest were paralyzed when "deregulation" dismantled most protections built up through the years.

The battle over the first and only Congressional violence report had nothing really to do with violence. It was a test case fought on the industry's favorite battle-

ground. It was a watershed marking the demise of the public trustee concept in broadcasting, the ascendency of the plutocracy of "market forces," and the full transfer of culture-power to the newly merging and consolidating conglomerates. It demonstrated politically, as media violence does symbolically, who can do what to whom in a conflict.

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The "Young Turks" of 1977, smarting from their defeat and dismayed at the collapse of their public constituency, made another attempt in 1981. Under the leadership of then Congressman Timothy Wirth a series of hearings attempted to revive the media violence issue. As it turned out, the hearings only exposed its political liabilities.

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, mistrust, and acceptance of repression.

Only one reference was made to our most telling basic findings. Representative Cardiss Collins, a member of 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 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?" (Hearing, 1982, pp. 230-231.) There was no answer or follow-up to her question.

The trade paper *Broadcasting* (October 226, 1981, p. 40), but no general media, noted my attempt to re-kindle the spirit of the 1977 report:

> The way to reduce violence is to "extend the economic support for a broader view of the social and cultural mission of television," said Gerbner. "Further hearings are needed to examine the ways in which democratic countries manage their TV systems," and the subcommittee "should recommend a mechanism that will finance a freer commercial system, one that can afford to present a fairer, more peaceful, and more democratic world of TV."

Mindful of the debacle of 1977, I also observed that "Without economically and politically viable alternatives, and despite all good intentions, going through the same motions every few years remains in my opinion an exercise in futility." (Hearing, 1981, p, 149.)

In the course of the final hearing a network executive found it "ironic...that while Gerbner attacks television for its fear-inducing elements, he is quite doubtful of the extent to which it generates serious violence. . .To his mind, television's danger is not that it undermines the social order but that it maintains it; not that it incites violence but that it 'cultivates acquiescence' to the powers that be." (Hearing, 1982, p. 55.) I think the real irony was lost on those focused on the problem of media violence, conventionally defined.

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." (Hearing, 1981, p. 235.)

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The tiger is riding high. Its power to thwart discussion or shunt it into convenient channels was displayed on the night of February 24, 1983 when I appeared on Ted Koppel's "Viewpoint" program on ABC dealing with television violence. (A transcript of Show #469 is available from ABC NEWS, Box 234, Ansonia Station, New York N.Y. 10023.)

Of the seven men and one woman on the program, four were broadcasters or their representatives and one a U.S. Associate Attorney General. The prior agreement was that each participant has one minute to introduce his or her position on television violence. Koppel called on me first."Is there," he asked, "a direct causal relationship to violence in our society?" That of course was just the question that begs the larger issue, so I said "Well, Ted...first we have to ask what is media violence?" when Koppel cut me off far short of the one minute to insist: "Humor me, oversimplify the answer for a moment. Do you think there's a direct causal relationship?"

Koppel has his finger on the button that switches cameras. "Humoring" him, or at least appearing to do so, is a good idea. So I continued to complete my one-minute answer: "Media violence is a demonstration of power. There is a direct causal relationship, our 15 years of research has shown, between exposure to violence and one's feeling of where one belongs in the power structure - one's feeling of vulnerability, one's feeling of insecurity, one's demand for protection, and one's welcoming even repression if it comes in the form of security. That is the direct relationship."

"All right," said Koppel, seemingly satisfied, and turned to the ABC Research Director who hastened to point out that "Well, I think the answer Dr. Gerbner suggests was, no, there is no causal relationship between television and crime, violence, the things that we're all concerned about."

Lest things go off the narrow track assigned to them, ("the things that we're all concerned about") and roles get confused, Koppel now cut him off insisting that I did say "there was a direct causal relationship" and tried for the rest of the evening to fit my comments into the conventional law-enforcement script. The star of the show was the federal prosecutor and later Republican candidate for mayor of New York city who used it for vigorous crime-fighting on the air.

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Summing up, persistent exposure to the media violence scenario has several social consequences. These include the cultivation of aggressive tendencies as well as of relative insecurity and anxiety; the sporadic triggering of violent acts; and a relatively high sense of potential victimization especially by the more dependent groups in a stereotypic social hierarchy.

Differential vulnerability, rigidity, and resistance to change seem to be the most telling consequences of exposure. Bombarding viewers by violent images of a mean and dangerous world remains, in the last analysis, an instrument of intimidation and terror.

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 the Third World. Probably the least affected by this particular offensive are the countries that have been until recently relatively insulated from the influx of television violence "Made in the USA."

This is a time of flux in the international communication and information order. The floodgates are opening for unrestrained penetration by a handful of transnational conglomerates in the name of democracy. If the Cold War turns into a new Holy Alliance, as those who declare themselves its "winners" seem to hope, 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 mass production of images and messages of violence plays a perhaps small but critical 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?

We need to build a broad constituency to halt the symbolic offensive. It should not be focused on violence alone. Only a new global environmental movement can arrest the degradation of the cultural mainstream we share in common. That is the habitat in which those who survive the deterioration of the physical environment will live and learn to act human.

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