

NIEMAN REPORTS

THE NIEMAN FOUNDATION AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Vol. XLV No. 4

Winter 1991

Move Over, Washington Here Comes Metro News

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Mass Media and Young People

Increased Emphasis on Death and Violence is Related To Decline in Youths' Life Prospects

BY PAUL CARTON

For the first time in American history, our youth are less healthy, less educated, and less able to take their place in society than were their parents. At the same time they are growing up in a mass media cultural environment bursting with violent audiovisual images and negative role models — an environment largely independent from the home, the school, the religion and even the community into which they were born.

Is there a relationship between the declining life prospects of our youth and the increased impact of today's mass media cultural environment?

Researchers have been trying to measure the impact of the media on young people for more than a half century. And while a large, if varied, body of evidence now exists on the subject, the findings are complex, the measurements imprecise and the results difficult to generalize. Nevertheless, most researchers agree that heavy television viewing impairs educational attainment and that it contributes to sex-role and ethnic stereotyping. They also agree that exposure to violent images — in the clinically controlled setting — heightens aggressive behavior among young people. There is far less agreement, however, on the impact of violent imagery outside the laboratory, primarily because of the great difficulty researchers have in measuring the connection between fantasy violence and real world violence.

While the debate over media effects continues, no one disputes the sheer pervasiveness of today's mass media culture. By the time they reach kindergarten, the average American child has seen between 6,000 and 8,000 hours of television — approximately

one-third of their total pre-school waking hours. By the age of 10, most children can name more brands of beer than Presidents. At maturity, they will have spent more time in front of a television than in any classroom. And television is just one — albeit integral — part of a massive infusion of colorful images into the daily lives of American youth; a broad cultural combination that now includes popular music, films, videos, magazines, supermarket tabloids, even video games and theme parks. By some estimates, more money is being spent on popular culture today than on the education of our young. Moreover, all this is occurring during the formative years when every aspect of a child's nature is developing and becoming habit.

A Closer Look At Youth Transformation

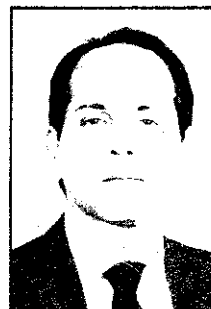
According to the 1991 Adolescent Health report published by the U.S. Office of Technology Assessment, the adolescent and teen years are a period of profound biological, emotional, intellectual and social transformation. "The physical changes are dramatic. One sees not only changes in height, weight and head size, but also changes in facial structure and facial expression and the spectacular development of the reproductive system. There may be emotional upheavals . . ." Other recent studies on substance abuse have further pointed to a window of vulnerability during the teen years — a critical three-to-four year period when they are particularly vulnerable to outside influence, before their values and ideas have fully formed.

Given these factors — coupled with the all-encompassing nature of today's mass media cultural environment — one

can infer that there are elements in the media that are exacerbating youth vulnerabilities and that are playing an important role in the transformation of our young people. But what are some of the key aspects of that transformation?

Since 1955, about the time television became a mainstay in the lives of American youth, national scholastic test scores have been steadily declining while learning disabilities have become epidemic in our schools. Today, leading educators report that less than 6 per cent of high school seniors can write a good essay, read something with moderately complicated sentence structure, or solve a two-step math problem.

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the president of the University of Puerto Rico on science and technology issues. From 1977 to 1984 he worked with Marttila and Kiley, the Boston political consulting firm. Among the campaigns he worked on were those for Senator Gary Hart for President, Rafael Hernández Colón for Governor of Puerto Rico, John Kerry for Senator from Massachusetts, Coleman Young for Mayor of Detroit and David Dinkins for Manhattan Borough President. He earned his Ph.D. from the State University of New York at Buffalo.

In all other industrialized countries, 15 to 30 per cent of a comparable group of students are able to perform these feats. The decline in American academic achievement has occurred across virtually every demographic category and in every region of the country. Moreover, it has also occurred among America's brightest students, whose performance now drops sharply while advancing from elementary through high school. A recent report by Educational Testing Service showed that while 16 per cent of fourth graders are able to search for specific information, relate ideas and make generalizations based on the data, by twelfth grade only 5 per cent can perform at this level — an egregious descent. The same report found the drop in high-level math performance to be just as pronounced. "The proportion of students who are top performers peaks in fourth grade and then declines through twelfth grade," according to ETS President Gregory Anrig. "It should be the other way around."

Significantly, a state-by-state comparison of math achievement levels for 1990 found that the top 10 states in math proficiency were also the 10 states that had the *lowest* percentage of pupils watching TV six or more hours a day.

Along with the unprecedented decline in academic achievement, there has been a huge increase in violent and antisocial behavior among our nation's youth. Back in 1950, the arrest rate for youths 14-17 was just 4 per 1,000; by 1985, the arrest rate had leaped to 118 per 1,000 — a 30-fold increase. The enormous jump in the rate of juvenile crime — including murder — has meant that young Americans are now much more likely to become victims. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, between 1984 and 1988 gun homicides for youths 15-19 rose by more than 60 per cent. Across the nation young people are becoming involved with gangs at earlier and earlier ages and inner-city minority communities have been disproportionately affected; the homicide rate for young black males 15-19 is now more than 11 times that of their white counterparts. At present, 135,000

students bring guns to school every day and reports from our urban battlefields are of a street ethic that at times seems to require young men to commit murder to prove their manhood. So fierce has been the fighting that in Brooklyn 60 innocent children were hit by random, stray bullets — and 15 of them subsequently died — during the first five months of 1991 alone.

Our nation's young people are also engaging in risky health behaviors at earlier and earlier ages — right when they are least able to cope with their actions. In 1965, there were roughly four cases of gonorrhea and syphilis for every 1,000 adolescents. By 1985, there were approximately 12 reported cases per 1,000 — a three-fold increase. Furthermore, every year nearly one American teenage girl in 10 gets pregnant, a rate more than twice that of any other industrialized country.

Of course, mass media culture — in and of itself — is not wholly responsible for decreasing educational attainment or for the astonishing increase in violent and risky behaviors. The American youth transformation is partially due to a whole host of other factors — including an enormous increase in drug and alcohol abuse, illegal weaponry, joblessness and the continued breakup of the family — that have acted in combination with one another to help produce the current social breakdown. These factors notwithstanding, it is argued here that our nation's mass media, largely owned and dominated by American corporations, has played a key role in the breakdown. Examples: By the age of 16 the average American child today has witnessed an estimated 200,000 acts of media violence, including 33,000 murders; popular teen movies routinely feature role models engaged in the most criminally indulgent, morally ambiguous and self-destructive forms of behavior; studies of alcohol usage on TV reveal that — despite more than 20,000 deaths annually from drunken driving — a youngster, too young to drink, will be exposed to 10 drinking acts on TV in a day's viewing and to more than 3,000 during a year. The examples are endless

and mind-numbing and have led critics to charge that it is within the sphere of children's broadcasting that the forces of market commercialism have proven most blatant. "Children . . . [are] considered just another ordinary segment of the overall audience," writes an alarmed New York Times critic, John J. O'Connor. "Fair game for the standard servings of sex and violence, not to mention the heavy barrage of commercials, often for products virtually guaranteed to rot teeth or reinforce objectionable stereotypes."

But what are some of the market forces shaping today's mass media cultural environment? Why the seemingly endless fixation on death, violence and sexual imagery in youth-oriented entertainment?

TV and the Changing American Marketplace

Looking back, the 1980's were a difficult time for network television in general and the worst in terms of bottom line profit that had ever been seen. There is no great mystery about why. The share of households watching network TV declined steadily throughout the decade — from more than 90 per cent to the mid-sixties. The explosive combination of cable television, videocassette recorders and a growing number of independents was responsible for much of the erosion; cost overruns, union disputes, and some old-fashioned low quality programming also contributed.

Network executives were well aware of the problem by the mid-1980's, when plunging profits and rising Hollywood production costs forced a series of initial measures. Hollywood studios — who for years had gotten top dollar to produce network programming — were first to feel the crunch; workforce layoffs and wage cutbacks quickly followed suit. None of it proved enough. Increasingly the fundamental network objective — to garner the largest possible audience for their advertisers — was met by producing a racier, high stimulus, thrills brand of programming. The growth of syndication and national cable networks only enhanced

this transformation. By the late 1980's, a trip around the dial in prime time was likely to reveal a brawling run amuck of violence, laughter and nonstop titillation, a wild and wacky world of pimps and prostitutes, stranglers and child molesters, semi-disassociated comedians and manufactured sexual superstars. While there were still quality exceptions to such sensationalism-for-profit fare — in particular sports, news and some of the older entertainment shows — the styles and genres that were becoming known as trash television, with their fixation on death, glamorized action and overt sexuality, had become a prominent fixture of the screen.

The American Fixation On Death and Violence

At present, the moderate viewer of prime time witnesses an average of 150 acts of violence and 15 murders each week, not counting cartoons and the news. Those who watch more than three hours a day — better than half of all Americans — absorb much more. The frequency of violent death witnessed on television bears almost no relationship to its occurrence in real life. To get to the origins of how this came about, one has to go back to the early 1970's, when the TV and film industry was just beginning to treat death as though it were an American obsession. Not that the subject hadn't always maintained a preeminence in human entertainment — throughout history it has been one of the dominant themes in world literature and the performing arts, and through much of the Twentieth Century in films and television. Up till the 1970's, however, death had been only one facet of the average entertainment fare — dying lovers bidding farewell, Indians being shot from their horses, enemy soldiers being blown to bits in the jungle; the concentration was still on the story line and not on the act itself. All this began to change, however, as producers began realizing that explicit showings of death and violence were often their most marketable commodity, that spicing up a movie or TV production with superbly realistic horror could have a remarkable effect on its chances of success.

Of course, too much death and violence could be a turnoff, just like too much sugar in the coffee. However, over the last two decades, as the public grew more and more used to it, there occurred a gradual but fundamental shift in the balance — bigger and bigger 'fixes' kept getting added to the average entertainment fare. There was also a radical transformation in the type of victim. In the period before 1970, the vast majority of television and movie violence was directed at men — the gunslinger, the enemy soldier, the mobster, the Army GI; but in ensuing years women increasingly became the focus of violence on the screen. During the 1980's, for example, it is arguable that more women were raped, stomped, beaten, and murdered in American entertainment than in the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies combined. The 1980's also saw the killing genre branch into teen movies in a major way. An onslaught of films featuring mad killers clawing and gnawing teens into component parts became enormously successful in all parts of the country.

Today the U.S. is in the midst of a horror boom. But as opposed to the early horror and mystery broadcasts of such luminaries as Serling and Hitchcock, which generally retained connections with everyday reality, today's horror revels in sickening brutalization and gore — women sprawled in basements blanketed in blood, horrid dismemberments, women being eaten live — all enormously enhanced through the increased usage of special effects imagery.

The 1980's was a decade of rapid acceleration for the image technologies. Talking computer heads, sexy robots and all sorts of inanimate objects suddenly came to life. By the end of the decade entire universes of computer animated images had come on the air. But while some industry technicians were learning to apply computer graphics to the selling of cars and soda and the like, others were perfecting a new area of expertise — computerized violent images. It had never been a secret that the same technology used to sell high-tech appliances could be used

to scare the daylight out of people. The American entertainment industry, however, was mastering the genre. Today, computer-enhanced imagery is routinely used to heighten the splattering of blood, perform chain saw executions, pull the skin off victims and carry our electric drill murders. Yet beyond the sharpened technical expertise, top producers and directors have also learned how to set up their deaths, how to draw in the audience by tugging on our emotional heartstrings, by heightening our anticipation and dread and, perhaps most importantly, by getting us to identify with the characters in the final moments before dispatch.

The New Frontier: Baby Murder

While violent death and negative imagery have become a staple of American entertainment, it wasn't until the end of the 1980's that the industry felt ready to take on what had heretofore been considered the biggest taboo: baby murder.

Until recently most TV and film observers had mistakenly believed fictionalized baby killing was beyond the realms of permissible exploit. No more. The movie *Dead Calm*, released in 1989, relies on dead babies and murdered dogs for effect. In one scene, a bright-eyed two-year-old boy grasping his teddy bear smashes headfirst through a car windshield. What is particularly noteworthy is that the killing was added solely for shock value — it had almost no relevance to the story line and wasn't even in the novel upon which the film was based. Still another example: the movie *Obsessed*, a 1990 release about a vengeful mother who tracks down her son's killer, contains an extended bloody scene of the child being struck and dragged to death underneath a car, along with still bloodier scenes of doctors attempting to resuscitate the mangled youth.

Future historians may well characterize the 1990's as the decade when the last vestiges of restraint were being removed from American film entertainment. Clearly the day isn't far off when child atrocities the American theatergoer has rarely witnessed before will be

commonplace — fetuses ripped apart like wishbones, infant head pulverizations, the sight of a dozen tiny creatures being tortured at once. And — given the increasingly bloodthirsty broadcast climate — it isn't so farfetched to imagine that future audiences reared on such imagery may not only grow accustomed to it, but will clamor for more.

Such a scenario is not that farfetched, given that today's story lines are often becoming mere excuses for broadcasting acts of violence interspersed with people doing bad things to one another. Of course there is the occasional positive film or television series — "My Left Foot", "Driving Miss Daisy," "Cosby" and "Sesame Street" and the like — which pursues worthy social objectives, but clearly an increasing number of negative and violent images are hitting Americans relative to positive ones. And these trends aren't limited solely to films and television. Even children's comic books have been affected. Many of today's popular comics pump out an endless supply of superstars who never experience any piece of mind, are likely as not to believe in the primacy of evil and in recent years have begun committing suicide on a regular basis. Violence and sado-masochistic sex are in. Super Girl was fatally wounded a while back. Issues of Green Arrow have depicted crucified strippers and a woman whose eyes were gouged out by vultures. Other publications routinely feature children being hacked to death and their pieces fed to animals.

But beyond films, television and comics — of all the forces helping to transform American youth culture perhaps none is as all-pervasive as popular music and music videos in particular.

Popular Music and Youth Culture

Whether or not they grew up in the Fifties and Sixties, most Americans have seen old footage of young people attending Elvis concerts or listening to the Beatles and other rock groups. We remember the reactions — the expressions on their faces, the near-hysterical adulation they bestowed on their

favorite rock heroes. More than a quarter-century later it appears this was no accident. Many of us didn't grasp it then, but it seems clear now that a new cultural force had arrived, a force that still hasn't been fully reckoned with or understood. Turn to any of the 24-hour music channels and you can witness a seemingly similar dynamic occurring with today's youth. They are receiving a new type of message, whole sets of messages actually, that are exciting them in ways that we still haven't fully grasped — except that it's somehow related to the combined impact of music and words.

It need hardly be said that the mind has an extraordinary ability to remember melodies, yet little is known about what happens when you combine melodies with words. The accepted wisdom, among researchers who study the effects of rock lyrics on teenagers, is that young people don't care much about the lyrics to songs; few teenagers listen closely to lyrics, fewer remember them, and fewer still understand them. These findings notwithstanding, the fact remains that many of us — if we were to grab a pencil and paper right now — could easily write down a dozen stanzas from a dozen different tunes (test yourself if you have doubts). Obviously, melodies and words undergo some form of linking-together process in our memories. Our increased ability to absorb words and messages when they are combined with certain harmonics could be related to music's rhythmic appeal. The beginnings of language in babies are always rhythmic musical vocalizations (the prime example: "Mama! Mama!"). Regardless of underlying cause, the Fifties and Sixties saw various pop groups become extraordinarily proficient at creating rhythmic musical messages — and the power of these messages was far greater than the innocuous advertising jingles of the past. Take the Beatles. No one would deny that they tapped deeply into people. Opinion samplings of their fans from the Sixties showed large numbers reporting aroused states of consciousness upon hearing them; not only such emotions as increased longing for loved

ones and a greater tenderness toward friends and acquaintances, but also an enhanced sense of oneness toward all of mankind. Moreover, the average young person was listening to their hits five to 10 times a day. Millions were being deluged with "All You Need Is Love" and a cacophony of anti-materialist messages — and not just from the Beatles. A whole host of pop groups, in combination, were reinforcing a set of values far removed from that decade's economic and cultural mainstream.

Of course, over the next quarter-century the corporate equilibrium reasserted itself. Pop music metamorphosed from the defining pulse of a generation into a mass-marketed, consumerist commodity. Today the music industry is employing the most advanced techniques of audio and visual stimulation known to science, in conjunction with highly sophisticated marketing programs that can guarantee the proper amount of mind-numbing repetition — to help shape the moods, thoughts and emotions of each new generation of American youth. Moreover, the youth transformation is being spearheaded by both a new popular music and a new set of popular music heroes; ones who no longer represent the love and flowery images that once so inspired the young, but rather, represent an entirely different set of qualities: super-hip yet wildly immoral, talented yet cynically self-indulgent. A new generation of qualities — tinged with undercurrents of violence — that have permeated the society at large and helped develop the kinds of youth culture and patterns of behavior that inhabit the world of today.

The new popular music heroes are rarely social instigators, they are entertainers. Outwardly they retain some of the rebel mannerisms of the Sixties — the non-conformity of dress and that peculiar breed of anti-establishment existentialism which is such a hit with the youth of today — but internally they retain little of the anti-materialist values or symbols of past icons. Instead, the new heroes have become absolute masters of the art of manipulating their own image. No one, especially their

fans, often has any idea of who they really are — what they think, what they feel, whether they vote left, right, up or down; only that they appear as angry and rebellious as the fans feel themselves. And even that is a masquerade. For the new heroes symbolize anti-socialism not because their own values are that way (politically a great number stand for almost next to nothing; their lives dedicated mostly to the trappings of celebrityhood — fancy cars, fancy homes, unbelievable riches, all of that nonstop glamour and excitement), they do so simply because they have become masters at doing whatever is needed to retain their own stardom. Yes, the new heroes have learned that essential trick of being admired not for what they say or think, in many cases not even for how they perform, but rather, for the artificial image that they have created for themselves.

The music and performances of the new heroes often strive to emulate the most distraught forms of dementia that can be found in our society. Of course, there are exceptions — there will always be exceptions. But violent, hedonistic images diametrically opposed to those of previous eras have become the symbols of the day. Skulls, sickles and swastikas, women chained to the dungeons, men on the way to the gallows — market research helps determine the mix. While some heroes become famous for their brutalities on stage, and others for complete male effeminacy, a frightening number strive to project the angry looks and queerness of manner that one normally finds only among the most severely disturbed in our society. We're talking about schizophrenia impersonators, actually. Heroes capable of pumping self-doubt, hostility, depression and anger into the far corners of the youth environment. Each exposure having only a fraction of an effect, of course, but over time the fractions adding up. And as successive generations of youth grow to love their new heroes the question we may soon be asking is: Are we shifting their consciousness toward the youth culture of a world gone mad?

Parents, for the most part, remain

unconcerned about the music their kids are listening to, doing homework to, falling asleep to. And in fact, it's impossible for anyone these days to point a finger solely at popular music. For today the new heroes are everywhere — in the movies, on your TV screens, leaping out of the tabloids. The 10 most admired people of the day are rock stars, film stars, movie directors, football quarterbacks, television stars. Indeed, today's mass media culture has put forth the largest, most talented group of manufactured celebrities the world has ever seen. Men and women who have no problem standing up for the values that have made this country great, happy heroes ready to promote beer, perfume, life insurance, soda — anything and everything if the price is right. So long as the superstars preach living in the material world, you know the kids will follow. But in the process something else has been occurring. To ever larger numbers of youths, heroes who were once considered highly for preaching greater social and personal responsibility are today simply thought of as dead.

Determining Cultural Patterns

It has been argued that a corporate-owned-and-dominated American mass media is largely determining the cultural patterns of today's youth. From early childhood on their mental processes are being shaped by a virtually seamless, total cultural package that includes TV, music, films, magazines and videos that — in combination — are exerting tremendous influence over their lives. There is no great mystery about why this corporate focus. Every year there is an enormous killing to be made off the youth market and it makes little economic sense to leave youthful buying habits and social attitudes to chance. People don't pick just their baseball and basketball teams when they are young, they also make lifelong choices of soda brands, favorite foods, rock stars, movie stars. Billions of dollars worth of brand name decisions are being made before the age of 10. This may well be the most cost-effective time to influence people's attitudes and opinions, their perceptions

of themselves and the world, their social roles — even their inner natures. We are talking about the most important years of our lives.

Given this perspective, it follows that corporate penetration of youth markets is at least partially dependent on one overriding principle: *If you can alter their self-image, all else will follow.* That is, it isn't simply a matter of transforming youth culture, or even replacing it, but of continually molding the consciousness of each new generation of youth. Ultimately, every thought, every idea, every feeling, every emotional characteristic, all goodness, all self-worth, all self-command, all honor can — indeed will — be radically transformed in such a totalizing cultural environment. And the corporate focus on youth culture is not only transforming youth buying patterns and opinions, it is magnifying negative youth vulnerabilities as well.

Yet this opens the door to a question that until now has not been confronted. That is: which parts of the youth makeup have been most affected by the mass media cultural bombardment? Out of the universe of inherent youth vulnerabilities which ones have undergone the most devastating transformation?

Adolescent and Teenage Vulnerabilities

A growing body of evidence suggests that media portrayals of sexual violence may be causing more damage to young people's views of themselves than anything else. One need only think back to the high school years to remember how delicate a teenager's conception of his or her own sexuality can be. It's vulnerable during normal times. In the current climate of increased sexual violence between men and women in the media, we are at risk of conditioning entire segments of our youth into believing abnormal sexual practice is the norm.

The 1970 U.S. Commission on Obscenity and Pornography sponsored much of the early studies on the effects of pornography. Although the Commission found that viewing pornography

had no marked impact on lab volunteers, the early research used only sexually explicit materials and did not use materials that combined sex with violence. More recent studies have pointed to pornography with *violent* content, rather than all pornography, as being associated with rape. And in 1986, then U.S. Surgeon General Koop issued a report summarizing current research in the field, which concluded that prolonged exposure to violent pornography increased male acceptance of coercion in sexual relations and — in the lab at least — punitive behavior toward women.

Few would dispute that over the past two decades the American media has become extraordinarily proficient at exploiting violent sexual fantasy images. Yet it should be emphasized that the focus on sexual fantasy, in and of itself, isn't necessarily harmful. In so far as 90 per cent of the human sexual response mechanism is within the mind, mental imaging has always played a big role in arousal and enjoyment. Among sexually active women, for example, two out of three report frequent fantasies during intercourse. While fantasies can act as a form of mental aphrodisiac, nonetheless, many involve situations that would be judged improper in real life, such as group sex, sado-masochism, voyeurism and rape. As the level of violent sexual fantasy images in the media increases, it is legitimate to question whether we are bringing these fantasies to the frontal centers of consciousness in some youths, where they can impinge on behavior and — in some cases — become the behavior.

Surveys of men under 30 have found a third admitting there was at least some likelihood they would rape a woman if they were assured no one would know and they wouldn't be caught. When the word force was substituted for the word rape, 50 per cent of respondents said there was some chance they would force a woman to have sex with them under those circumstances. In other surveys more than half of high school-aged males have stated that if a girl "leads a boy on" raping her is at least somewhat justifiable. It is obvious that a significant percentage of young adult males have at

least some tendencies toward sexual violence — albeit largely contained. But as we increase the levels of violent sexually explicit images in youth-oriented entertainment, and as the media becomes ever more proficient at mixing music and words with these images, the survey numbers suggest that it could have extraordinary impact. That given enough time we could erase the line between thinking and doing among some youths, help turn their wildest fantasy images into reality; but perhaps even more importantly, that we can help create a flourishing subculture in which the taking of sexual advantage becomes commonplace. Youths cut off from the unconscious feelings of turmoil and guilt that historically have helped control promiscuous behavior.

Guilt, the sense of anguish we have when we fall short of our own standards, has long been recognized as a prime influence on people to serve the social good. It is one of the adhesives that binds us together. The current mass media cultural environment — with its mix of sexual violence, nonstop glamour, sensational action and instant results — appears to be helping neutralize the warning functions of conscience in some of our youth; ridding them of that peculiar inner pressure that normally results when we betray our own internalized models of behavior. In so doing, it is helping to reinforce the ugliest of social mentalities — one rooted in self-gratification and the accumulation of power and wealth to the exclusion of everything else. It is a mentality that too often grabs hold of our youth in their formative years and keeps their lives revolving around the satisfaction of individual consumption from that point on. One might call it selfishness elevated to the realm of ideology. The evolution of a new world inhabited by people who no longer act in accordance with what is or isn't socially "right," but in ways that are convenient, economically self-indulgent, or otherwise self-serving. A world inhabited by millions who have been stripped of their social conscience.

The rise of a corporate dominated, mass media cultural environment and the continued decline in the life pros-

pects of American youth are not separate and disconnected phenomena. Moreover, nationally there is growing recognition that we face an unprecedented youth health, values and education crisis — one that has serious repercussions for our economy and our social well-being.

While historically a majority of Americans have tended to ignore mass media issues, recent polling data confirms important attitudinal shifts. Today most people believe that televised violence and programs depicting nudity and sex are encouraging immorality and violence in real life. Teens and children are felt to be particularly at risk. The majority of Americans, however, oppose governmental efforts to regulate programming.

While a majority say banning or censoring programs is not the answer, mounting concern about media effects is spawning a variety of new approaches to the problem. Media awareness and teen violence programs that deal with popular culture issues have sprung up around the country, though so far with limited results. In San Francisco, a local PBS station actually broadcast a program that encouraged young viewers to turn off their sets. The station formed a link with city libraries and encouraged kids to go there and read. "It's the most effective program we have ever seen," says Niel Parikh, Coordinator of Children's Services for the San Francisco Library. "It's bringing in children we have never seen before who are staying to participate in our summer reading program."

Admirable, but much more powerful and comprehensive solutions will be needed if America ever hopes to deal effectively with the youth crisis at hand.

A Call for a Cultural Environment Movement

In his modest, book-filled office, on the third floor of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School, George Gerbner is dead-set on organizing the nucleus of a massive, citizens-based, cultural environment movement. In his view, the historic necessity for such a movement has been evident for some time.

According to Professor Gerbner, a 70-year-old internationally recognized scholar on mass media and culture, the world as we know it — the symbolic environment in which we live — has been transformed. Media are no longer separately owned and operated channels of communication. Unbeknown to most Americans, they have merged into a highly centralized and monopolistic global system. "Most of the stories being told to our children," says Gerbner, "are being transmitted not by parents, teachers, clergy, or members of the community, but by distant transnational corporations with something to sell. With hardly any debate, the process of growing up and learning about the world — even about life itself — has become largely a byproduct of marketing."

This astonishing development, according to Gerbner, now frames much of what we think and do. It cultivates our perceptions of reality. It guides the shaping of public policy. For many of us it acts to define life's choices. And yet, Gerbner finds, "... the manufactured perspectives of our mass media cultural environment go virtually unchallenged — as if beyond the reach of the democratic policymaking process."

Possibly, no longer.

Since December 1990, he has been gathering small groups of people together in borrowed conference rooms in Washington and Philadelphia to develop blueprints for a national, citizens-based movement concerned with the mass media cultural environment. The organization now has approximately 150 members representing a wide range of groups including the American Medical Association, various PTA's, local media councils, mental health organizations, minority, religious and children's groups, and faculty and students from across the United States. The challenge, Gerbner keeps reiterating, is to build a new coalition and a broad constituency to work for democratic media reform, to support media education, and to develop ways for citizen participation in national media policymaking. A national conference to

place cultural/media issues on the American political agenda is planned for Washington in 1992.

"It hasn't been easy," says Gerbner, "since we are organizing people with an extraordinary variety of perspectives, yet with the same shared interest in keeping the nation free from centralized dictation — whether by public or private entities."

No one should doubt Gerbner's commitment to the principles of free expression. A Hungarian emigré, he arrived in the U.S. virtually penniless back in the 1930's, yet went on to become Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication — a post he held for 25 years. Gerbner's own story is one of the triumph of freedom and of individual initiative, and today he takes great pains to explain that people can — indeed, have the duty to — speak out against corporate and governmental media excess, even as they strongly support our constitutional right to unlimited free expression. "The movement strongly opposes any form of media or journalistic censorship," he emphasizes, "but we are just as committed to fostering greater diversity and accountability on the part of the powerful corporate and government forces that today dominate our cultural environment."

Whether this kind of fledgling movement can succeed is far from certain, however. Currently, there are almost no counterbalancing forces in American life to insure that corporate media conglomerates serve the public interest. The nation has historically relied on Congress and the Federal Communications Commission to provide oversight to the industry. Yet for more than two decades congressional lawmakers have allowed the media to ignore most of their public interest obligations — and according to Ralph Nader the FCC has done much worse. "The FCC has a dismal record of serving consumers," he said at an April 24, 1991 press conference. "It has repeatedly enacted policies that serve the interests of the media industries, at the expense of the public interest. It hasn't ever provided a horizon of excellence for its regulatees to aspire toward in the new information society

of the 1990's . . . The FCC is the prototype indentured servant of the industry it is supposed to regulate under its statutes."

Prophetically, just four weeks after Nader's press conference Time Warner Inc. announced it was hiring the former Chairman of the FCC, Dennis R. Patrick, and three other high-level former FCC officials, to head their newest telecommunications subsidiary in Washington. While Time Warner officials pointed out that Patrick would not be used to lobby the FCC, they admitted that his knowledge of the agency would be helpful as they seek to develop new businesses.

In a subsequent story on the hiring, The Washington Post reported that all of the businesses that Time Warner is currently seeking to enter are regulated by the FCC.

Remaking American Society

More and more the cultural patterns of today are being determined in the suites and boardrooms of corporate America. From early childhood on they are influencing the mental processes of our youths even more so than the parents themselves. They have the power to remake our society, and they are using that power.

Today hundreds of thousands of American youths are experiencing school failure, displaying serious health problems, and turning to lives of crime, drugs, unemployment and welfare. At the same time, 87 per cent of the public believes that the mass media cultural environment is far more violent and sexually explicit today than it was even 10 years ago and most Americans believe the media has helped lock the morality of the country into a downward spiral.

Except for a few, frightfully underfunded attempts by a handful of Americans, we aren't doing much of anything as a nation about it. And all of us share some responsibility for having so underestimated the danger here. We risk becoming a society frightened to death of the youth that have sprung from our own loins. □