MARKETING GLOBAL MAYHEM

GEORGE GERBNER

George Gerbner
is Professor
and Dean Emeritus
of the Annenberg
School of
Communication,
University of
Pennsylvania.

Introduction

Humankind may have 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 colourful 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. Violence is a legitimate and even necessary feature of cultural expression, balancing deadly conflicts and compulsions against tragic costs. But the historically limited, individually crafted and, selectively, used symbolic mayhem has been swamped by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly-line.

The violence and terror we see on television bear 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 "action" into dramatic programs and news. Our recent study found that crime and violence news doubled while actual violence declined, precluding the possibility of balanced reporting.

Our long-standing research project called Cultural Indicators[1] has found that children are born into a cultural environment of five violent acts per prime-time hour, four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs, and two to three 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.

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

Media violence demonstrates power and paves the way for repression. It is an integral part of an increasingly centralised,

conglomerated and globalised media production and distribution system that has drifted out of democratic reach. That system creates the cultural environment in which we all live, with television its mainstream.

A child today is born into a home in which television is on an average of more than seven hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.

This is a radical change in the way we employ creative talent and the way we cast the cultural environment. The roles we grow into and the ways others see us are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, community-inspired. They are products of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. Television is the mainstream of the process. Our Cultural Indicators research project has built a cumulative database describing many thousands of characters, programs, and items that map key features of the new cultural environment.

Fewer sources fill more outlets more of the time with ever more standardised fare designed for global markets. Global marketing streamlines production, homogenises content, sweeps alternative perspectives from the mainstream, and moves cultural policy beyond democratic, or even national, reach. There is no historical precedent, constitutional provision, or legislative blueprint to confront the challenge of the new consolidated controls that really count — global conglomerate controls over the design, production, promotion and distribution of media content and the power relationships embedded in it.

The casting and fate of characters in television drama set the stage for violence and other power-plays to follow. Women play one out of three roles in prime time television, one out of four in children's programs, and one out of five of those who make news. They fall short of majority even in daytime serials. They age faster than men, and as they age, they are more likely to be portrayed evil and to be victimised.

People of colour, the vast majority of humankind, are less than 11 per cent of prime-time and 3 per cent of children's program casts. When Americans, they are mostly middle-class, making the race issue virtually invisible. Latino/Hispanics, over **nine per cent of the US population**, are about one per cent of prime time and half of that of children's program casts. A child viewer sees the fewest minorities.

In the overwhelmingly middle-class consumer world of television, poor people play a negligible role. The low-income 13 per cent of the US (and much larger percentage of minorities) is reduced to 1.3 per cent or less on television. A disproportionate number of ill-fated characters come from the ranks of poor, Latino and foreign men, and African-American and poor women.

Programs designed specifically for children's favourite viewing time, Saturday morning, present a world that is even harsher than prime time. The inequities of prime time are magnified Saturday morning. A child will see about 123 characters each Saturday morning, but rarely, if ever, a mature female as leader. Married and parent images are curiously rare and gloomy in children's programs. Mid-life and older women in Saturday morning children's programs are the least visible but most evil and, consequently most highly victimised group; this is where the witches are.

Casting and fate also affect those who deliver the news, who are referred to and cited in the news, and who are news. In most essential characteristics, news deals with the exercise of power: who has it, who uses it, who seeks it, and, most of all, who threatens it.

Women decline in representation from 35 per cent as newscasters to 20 per cent as authorities cited and 17 per cent as newsmakers. Other minorities are also most visible delivering and least visible making news. When they do, they are most likely to appear as criminals. African-Americans make news as criminals at least twice as often as other groups do, despite the fact that 62 per cent of criminals are white.

The Mean World Syndrome

Our analysis based on large national probability sample surveys indicates that long-term regular exposure to television tends to make an independent contribution to the feeling of living in a mean and gloomy world. The "lessons" range from aggression to desensitisation and to a sense of vulnerability and dependence.

Heavy viewers are more likely than comparable groups of light viewers to overestimate one's chances of involvement in violence; to believe that one's neighbourhood is unsafe; to state that fear of crime is a very serious personal problem; and to assume that crime is rising, regardless of the facts of the case. Heavier viewers in every subgroup (defined by education, age, income, gender, newspaper reading, neighbourhood, etc.) express a greater sense of insecurity and mistrust than do light viewers in the same groups. Other results show that heavy viewers are also more likely to have bought new locks, watchdogs, and guns "for protection." Finally, viewers who see members of their own group have a higher calculus of risk than those of other groups feel the most vulnerable and dependent.

This unequal sense of danger, vulnerability and general unease, combined with reduced sensitivity, invites not only aggression but also exploitation and repression. Bombarding viewers by violent images of a mean and dangerous world remains, in the last analysis, an instrument of intimidation and terror. That is the deeper problem of violence-laden television.

Is This What the Viewers Want?

Television violence is an overkill of "happy violence" — swift, cool, effective, without tragic consequences and in other ways divorced from real life and crime statistics. "Happy violence" is the by-product of a manufacturing and marketing process that defies popular taste and imposes uniformity on creative people and viewers.

There is no evidence that, other factors being equal, violence per se is giving most viewers "what they want." The most highly rated programs are usually not violent. A test of the relationship between violence and ratings refutes the standard rationalisation for violent programming.

Our study compared the average Nielsen ratings of two samples of over 100 programs each to test the popularity of the violence formula. The samples were drawn from the Cultural Indicators Data Archive for the past five seasons. In one sample all programs have high levels of violence; in the other sample no programs contain violence. Average Nielsen ratings and shares for the two samples were then compared.

The Table 1 gives the results. It shows that violence **per se** consistently receives lower ratings.

Table I: Comparison of Nielsen ratings of violent and non-violent network prime-time dramatic programs aired 1988-93				
	Violent programs N=104		Non-violent programs N=103	
Years aired	Rating	Share	Rating	Share
1988-89	12.8	21	4.5	24
1989-90	12.0	20	14.8	24
1990-91	8.4	17	10.5	21
1991-92	11.3	19	14.8	23
1992-93	10.0	16	13.0	20
Overall means	11.1	18.9	13.8	22.5

The overall average rating of the violent sample is 11.1; the same for the non-violent sample is 13.8. The share of the violent and non-violent samples is 18.9 and 22.5, respectively. Furthermore, the non-violent sample was more highly rated than the violent sample for each of the four seasons.

The evidence also shows that most people suffer the violence inflicted on them with diminishing tolerance. A March 1985 Harris survey showed that 78 per cent disapprove of violence they see on television. A Gallup poll of October 1990 found 79 per cent in favour of "regulating" objectionable content in television. A Times-Mirror national poll in 1993 showed that Americans who said they were "personally bothered" by violence in entertainment shows jumped to 59 per cent from 44 per cent in 1983. Furthermore, 80 per cent said entertainment violence was "harmful" to society, compared with 64 per cent in 1983, and almost twice as many people — 58 per cent compared with 31 per cent — said entertainment violence bothered them more than news violence.

Local broadcasters, legally responsible for what goes on the air, also oppose the overkill and complain about loss of control. The trade paper, *Electronic Media*, reported in August 1993, the results of its own survey of 100 general managers across all US regions and in all market sizes. Three out of four said there is too much needless violence on television; 57 per cent would like to have more input on program content decisions.

What Drives "Happy Violence?"

Why, then, does a public relations-conscious and politically sophisticated industry persist in risking domestic backlash and international embarrassment for its perennially violent fare? The answer is that violence "travels well" on the global market. Rapid concentration, conglomeratisation, and globalisation in the media industry bring streamlining of production, economies of scale, and emphasis on dramatic ingredients most suitable for aggressive international promotion.

Most program producers barely break even on the domestic market. They are forced onto the world market and into all forms of syndication, including cable and video sales, to make a profit. Program production and distribution systems are merging, reversing prior antitrust restraints on monopolisation, and moving toward total control of the world market by a handful of conglomerates.

Global marketing needs a dramatic ingredient that requires no translation, is primarily image-driven, "speaks" action in any language, and fits into a conventional pattern in many cultures. That ingredient is violence. (Graphic sex is second, but, ironically, that runs into more inhibitions and restrictions than violence.)

Syndicates demand "action" because it "travels well around the world," said the producer of "Die Hard 2" (which killed 264 compared to 18 in "Die Hard 1," produced in 1988). "Everyone understands an action movie. If I tell a joke, you may not get it but if a bullet goes through the window, we all know how to hit the floor, no matter the language" (Auletta 1993, 45).

Bruce Gordon, President of Paramount International TV Group, explained that "The international demand rarely changes... Action-adventure series and movies continue to be the genre in demand, primarily because those projects lose less in translation to other languages... Comedy series are never easy because in most of the world most of the comedies have to be dubbed and wind up losing their humour in the dubbing" (Gordon 1992, 19).

An analysis of international data in the Cultural Indicators database compared a sample of 250 US programs exported to 10 countries with 111 programs shown in the US only during the same year. Violence was the main theme of 40 per cent of home-shown and 49 per cent of exported programs. Crime/action series comprised 17 per cent of home-shown and 46 per cent of exported programs. What violent programs lose on ratings, they more than make up by grabbing the attention of younger viewers whom advertisers want to reach and by extending their reach globally.

The Liberating Alternative

Far from reflecting creative freedom, the global strategy wastes talent, chills originality, and fails to serve the tastes and needs of any country. The Hollywood Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors, speaking for the creative community, said in a statement issued on the eve of the August 1993 "summit" conference on television violence: "We stand today at a point in time when the country's dissatisfaction with the quality of television is at an all-time high, while our own feelings of helplessness and lack of power, in not only choosing material that seeks to enrich, but also in our ability to execute to the best of our ability, is at an all-time low."

There is an alternative. It is not the "electronic superhighway." Given the convergence of communication technologies, the concentration of ownership, and the shrinking of independent creative opportunities, the notion that the new convergence will provide more jobs and greater choice is a technocratic fantasy. The same (or fewer) programs now being mass-produced for the largest possible markets will run on more channels more of the time, while informercial hustle, direct marketing, gambling, and videogames (billed as interactive multimedia democracy) will fill the rest. Cross-media synergy and the global consolidation of electronic marketing is more likely to reduce

than to increase the creation of new cultural resources unless provision is made to loosen the noose of global formulas from around the necks of creative people.

More freedom, not more censorship, is the effective and acceptable way to increase diversity and reduce television violence to its legitimate role and proportion. The role of government, if any, is to turn its anti-trust and civil rights oversight on the centralised and globalised industrial structures and marketing strategies that impose violent stereotypes on creative people and foist it on the children of the world. The role of citizens is to offer a liberating alternative to the repressive movements and proposals in the field.

That liberating alternative exists in the Cultural Environment Movement. CEM is a new international coalition of media, professional, labour, religious, health-related, women's and minority groups opposed to private corporate as well as government censorship.[2] CEM is working for freedom from stereotyped formulas; for respecting the integrity of cultures and opposing the homogenisation; for investing in a freer and more diverse cultural environment; and for citizen participation in cultural decisions that shape our lives and the lives of our children.

Notes:

1. The "Cultural Indicators" project is an ongoing research project, started in 1967, tracking the world of network television and the long-range consequences of viewing.

2. CEM is preparing for its "Founding Convention" in March 1996 in St. Louis, hosted by the Webster University. For more iformation write to: CEM, P.O.Box 31847, Philadelphia PA 19104, USA.

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