
Living with Television: The Violence Profile

GEORGE GERBNER
LARRY GROSS

THE ENVIRONMENT THAT SUSTAINS the most distinctive aspects of human existence is the environment of symbols. We learn, share, and act upon meanings derived from that environment. The first and longest lasting organization of the symbolic world was what we now call religion. Within its sacred scope, in earlier times, were the most essential processes of culture: art, science, technology, statecraft, and public story-telling.

Common rituals and mythologies are agencies of symbolic socialization and control. They demonstrate how society works by dramatizing its norms and values. They are essential parts of the general system of messages that cultivates prevailing outlooks (which is why we call it culture) and regulates social relationships. This system of messages, with its story-telling functions, makes people perceive as real and normal and right that which fits the established social order.

The institutional processes producing these message systems have become increasingly professionalized, industrialized, centralized, and specialized. Their principal locus shifted from handicraft to mass production and from traditional religion and formal education to the mass media of communications—particularly television. New technologies on the horizon may enrich the choices of the choosy but cannot replace the simultaneous public experience of a common symbolic environment that now binds diverse communities,

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including large groups of young and old and isolated people who have never before joined any mass public. Television is likely to remain for a long time the chief source of repetitive and ritualized symbol systems cultivating the common consciousness of the most far-flung and heterogeneous mass publics in history.

Our long-range study of this new symbolic environment developed from, and still includes, the annual Violence Index and Profile of TV content and its correlates in viewers' conceptions of relevant aspects of social reality. . . . The pattern of findings that is beginning to emerge confirms our belief that television is essentially different from other media and that research on television requires a new approach. In this article we shall sketch the outlines of a critique of modes of research derived from experience with other media and advance an approach we find more appropriate to the special characteristics, features, and functions of television. . . .

We begin with the assertion that television is the central cultural arm of American society. It is an agency of the established order and as such serves primarily to extend and maintain rather than to alter, threaten, or weaken conventional conceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. Its chief cultural function is to spread and stabilize social patterns, to cultivate not change but resistance to change. Television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is, in a word, enculturation.

The substance of the consciousness cultivated by TV is not so much specific attitudes and opinions as more basic assumptions about the "facts" of life and standards of judgment on which conclusions are based. The purpose of the Cultural Indicators project is to identify and track these premises and the conclusions they might cultivate across TV's diverse publics. . . .

Never before have all classes and groups (as well as ages) shared so much of the same culture and the same perspectives while having so little to do with their creation. Representation in the world of television gives an idea, a cause, a group its sense of public identity, importance, and relevance. No movement can get going without some visibility in that world or long withstand television's power to discredit, insult, or undercut. Other media, used selectively and by special interests or cultural elites, cultivate partial and parochial outlooks. Television spreads the same images and messages to all from penthouse to tenement. TV is the new (and only) culture of those who expose themselves to information only when it comes as "entertainment." Entertainment is the most broadly effective educational fare in any culture.

All major networks serving the same social system depend on the same markets and programming formulas. That may be one reason why, unlike other media, television is used non-selectively: it just doesn't matter that much. With the exception of national events and some "specials," the total viewing audience is fairly stable regardless of what is on. Individual tastes

and program preferences are less important in determining viewing patterns than is the time a program is on. The nearly universal, non-selective, and habitual use of television fits the ritualistic pattern of its programming. You watch television as you might attend a church service, except that most people watch television more religiously. . . .

These considerations led us to question many of the more common arguments raised in discussions of television's effects. An important example is the concern over the consequences of violence on television. The invention and development of technologies which permit the production and dissemination of mass mediated fictional images across class lines seems invariably to raise in the minds of the established classes the specter of subversion, corruption and unrest being encouraged among the various lower orders—poor people, ethnic and racial minorities, children and women. The specter arises when it seems that the lower orders may presume to imitate—if not to replace—their betters. Whether the suspect and controversial media are newspapers, novels, and theater, as in the nineteenth century, or movies, radio, comic books, and television as in the twentieth, concern tends to focus on the possibilities of disruption that threaten the established norms of belief, behavior, and morality.

In our view, however, that concern has become anachronistic. Once the industrial order has legitimized its rule, the primary function of its cultural arm becomes the reiteration of that legitimacy and the maintenance of established power and authority. The rules of the games and the morality of its goals can best be demonstrated by dramatic stories of their symbolic violations. The intended lessons are generally effective and the social order is only rarely and peripherally threatened. The system is the message and, as our politicians like to say, the system works. Our question is, in fact, whether it may not work too well in cultivating uniform assumptions, exploitable fears, acquiescence to power, and resistance to meaningful change.

Therefore, in contrast to the more usual statement of the problem, we do not believe that the only critical correlate of television violence is to be found in the stimulation of occasional individual aggression. The consequences of living in a symbolic world ruled largely by violence may be much more far-reaching. . . . TV violence is a dramatic demonstration of power which communicates much about social norms and relationships, about goals and means, about winners and losers, about the risks of life and the price for transgressions of society's rules. Violence laden drama shows who gets away with what, when, why, how and against whom. "Real world" victims as well as violents may have to learn their roles. Fear—that historic instrument of social control—may be an even more critical residue of a show of violence than aggression. Expectation of violence or passivity in the face of injustice may be consequences of even greater social concern. We shall return to this theme with data from our studies.

The realism of TV fiction hides its synthetic and functionally selective

nature. The dominant stylistic convention of Western narrative art—novels, plays, films, TV dramas—is that of representational realism. However contrived television plots are, viewers assume that they take place against a backdrop of the real world. Nothing impeaches the basic "reality" of the world of television drama. It is also highly informative. That is, it offers to the unsuspecting viewer a continuous stream of "facts" and impressions about the way of the world, about the constancies and vagaries of human nature, and about the consequences of actions. The premise of realism is a Trojan horse which carries within it a highly selective, synthetic, and purposeful image of the facts of life.

A normal adult viewer is not unaware of the fictiveness of television drama. No one calls the police or an ambulance when a character in a television program is shot. "War of the Worlds"-type scares are rare, if they occur at all. Granting this basic awareness on the part of the viewers, one may still wonder how often and to what degree all viewers suspend their disbelief in the reality of the symbolic world.

Surely we all know that Robert Young is not a doctor and that Marcus Welby is an M.D. by only poetic license. Yet according to the Philadelphia Bulletin (July 10, 1974) in the first five years of the program "Dr. Welby" received over a quarter of a million letters from viewers, most containing requests for medical advice. . . .

Anecdotes and examples should not trivialize the real point, which is that even the most sophisticated can find many important components of their knowledge of the real world derived wholly or in part from fictional representation. How often do we make a sharp distinction between the action which we know is not "real" and the accumulation of background information (which is, after all, "realistic")? Are we keenly aware that in the total population of the television world men outnumber women four to one? Or that, with all the violence, the leading causes of real life injury and death—industrial and traffic accidents—are hardly ever depicted?

How many of us have ever been in an operating room, a criminal courtroom, a police station or jail, a corporate board room, or a movie studio? How much of what we know about such diverse spheres of activity, about how various kinds of people work and what they do—how much of our real world has been learned from fictional worlds? To the extent that viewers see television drama—the foreground of plot or the background of the television world—as naturalistic, they may derive a wealth of incidental "knowledge." This incidental learning may be effected by bald "facts" and by the subtle interplay of occurrence, co-occurrence, and non-occurrence of actors and actions.

In addition to the subtle patterns against whose influence we may all be somewhat defenseless, television provides another seductively persuasive sort of imagery. In real life much is hidden from our eyes. Often, motives are obscure, outcomes ambiguous, personalities complex, people unpredictable.

ble. The truth is never pure and rarely simple. The world of television, in contrast, offers us cogency, clarity, and resolution. Unlike life, television is an open book. Problems are never left hanging, rewards and punishments are present and accounted for. The rules of the game are known and rarely change. Not only does television "show" us the normally hidden workings of many important and fascinating institutions—medicine, law enforcement and justice, big business, the glamorous world of entertainment, etc.—but we "see" the people who fill important and exciting roles. We see who they are in terms of sex, age, race, and class and we also see them as personalities—dedicated and selfless, ruthless and ambitious, good-hearted but ineffectual, lazy and shiftless, corrupt and corrupting. Television provides the broadest common background of assumptions not only about what things are but also about how they work, or should work, and why. . . .

The implications for research are far-reaching and call into question essential aspects of the research paradigm stemming from historic pressures for behavior manipulation and marketing efficacy. They suggest a model based on the concept of broad enculturation rather than of narrow changes in opinion or behavior. Instead of asking what communication "variables" might propagate what kinds of individual behavior changes, we want to know what types of common consciousness whole systems of messages might cultivate. This is less like asking about preconceived fears and hopes and more like asking about the "effects" of Christianity on one's view of the world or—as the Chinese *had* asked—of Confucianism on public morality. . . .

How should, then, the effects of television be conceptualized and studied? We believe that the key to the answer rests in a search for those assumptions about the "facts" of life and society that television cultivates in its more faithful viewers. That search requires two different methods of research. The relationship between the two is one of the special characteristics of the Cultural Indicators approach.

The first method of research is the periodic analysis of large and representative aggregates of television output (rather than individual segments) as the system of messages to which total communities are exposed. The purpose of message system analysis is to establish to composition and structure of the symbolic world. We have begun that analysis with the most ubiquitous, translucent, and instructive part of television (or any cultural) fare, the dramatic programs (series, cartoons, movies on television) that populate and animate for most viewers the heartland of the symbolic world. Instead of guessing or assuming the contours and dynamics of that world, message system analysis maps its geography, demography, thematic and action structure, time and space dimensions, personality profiles, occupations, and fates. Message system analysis yields the gross but clear terms of location, action, and characterization discharged into the mainstream of community consciousness. Aggregate viewer interpretation and response starts with these common terms of basic exposure.

The second step of the research is to determine what, if anything, viewers absorb from living in the world of television. Cultivation analysis, as we call that method, inquires into the assumptions television cultivates about the facts, norms, and values of society. Here we turn the findings of message system analysis about the fantasy land of television into questions about social reality. To each of these questions there is a "television answer," which is like the way things appear in the world of television, and another and different answer which is biased in the opposite direction, closer to the way things are in the observable world. We ask these questions of samples of adults and children. All responses are related to television exposure, other media habits, and demographic characteristics. We then compare the response of light and heavy viewers controlling for sex, age, education, and other characteristics. The margin of heavy viewers over light viewers giving the "television answers" within and across groups is the "cultivation differential" indicating conceptions about social reality that viewing tends to cultivate. Our analysis looks at the contribution of TV drama to viewer conceptions in conjunction with such other sources of knowledge as education and news. The analysis is intended to illuminate the complementary as well as the divergent roles of these sources of facts, images, beliefs, and values in the cultivation of assumptions about reality.

We shall now sketch some general features of the world of network television drama. . . . As any mythical world, television presents a selective and functional system of messages. Its time, space, and motion—even its "accidents"—follow laws of dramatic convention and social utility. Its people are not born but are created to depict social types, causes, powers, and fates. The economics of the assembly line and the requirement of wide acceptability assure general adherence to common notions of justice and fair play, clear-cut characterizations, tested plot lines, and proven formulas for resolving all issues.

Representation in the fictional world signifies social existence: absence means symbolic annihilation. Being buffeted by events and victimized by people denotes social impotence; ability to wrest events about, to act freely, boldly, and effectively is a mark of dramatic importance and social power. Values and forces come into play through characterizations; good is a certain type of attractiveness, evil is a personality defect, and right is the might that wins. Plots weave a thread of causality into the fabric of dramatic ritual, as stock characters act out familiar parts and confirm preferred notions of what's what, who's who, and who counts for what. The issue is rarely in doubt; the action is typically a game of social typing, group identification, skill, and power.

Many times a day, seven days a week, the dramatic pattern defines situations and cultivates premises about society, people, and issues. Casting the symbolic world thus has a meaning of its own: the lion's share of representation goes to the types that dominate the social order. About three-quarters of

all leading characters are male, American, middle- and upper-class, and in the prime of life. Symbolic independence requires freedom relatively uninhabited by real-life constraints. Less fully represented are those lower in the domestic and global power hierarchy and characters involved in familiar social contexts, human dependencies, and other situations that impose the real-life burdens of human relationships and obligations upon freewheeling activity.

Women typically represent romantic or family interest, close human contact, love. Males can act in nearly any role, but rare is the female part that does not involve at least the suggestion of sex. While only one in three male leads is shown as intending to or ever having been married, two of every three females are married or expect to marry in the story. Female "specialties" limit the proportion of TV's women to about one-fourth of the total population.

Nearly half of all females are concentrated in the most sexually eligible young adult population, to which only one-fifth of males are assigned; women are also disproportionately represented among the very young and old. Children, adolescents, and old people together account for less than 15 percent of the total fictional population.

Approximately five in ten characters can be unambiguously identified as gainfully employed. Of these, three are proprietors, managers, and professionals. The fourth comes from the ranks of labor—including all those employed in factories, farms, offices, shops, stores, mining, transportation, service stations, restaurants, and households, and working in unskilled, skilled, clerical, sales, and domestic service capacities. The fifth serves to enforce the law or preserve the peace on behalf of public or private clients.

Types of activity—paid and unpaid—also reflect dramatic and social purposes. Six in ten characters are engaged in discernible occupational activity and can be roughly divided into three groups of two each. The first group represents the world of legitimate private business, industry, agriculture, finance, etc. The second group is engaged in activity related to art, science, religion, health, education, and welfare, as professionals, amateurs, patients, students, or clients. The third makes up the forces of official or semiofficial authority and the army of criminals, outlaws, spies, and other enemies arrayed against them. One in every four leading characters acts out a drama of some sort of transgression and its suppression at home and abroad.

Violence plays a key role in such a world. It is the simplest and cheapest dramatic means available to demonstrate the rules of the game of power. In real life much violence is subtle, slow, circumstantial, invisible, even impersonal. Encounters with physical violence in real life are rare, more sickening than thrilling. But in the symbolic world, overt physical motion makes dramatically visible that which in the real world is usually hidden. Symbolic violence, as any show of force, typically does the job of real violence more cheaply and, of course, entertainingly.

Geared for independent action in loosely-knit and often remote social contexts, half of all characters are free to engage in violence. One-fifth "specialize" in violence as law breakers or law enforcers. Violence on television, unlike in real-life, rarely stems from close personal relationships. Most of it is between strangers, set up to drive home lessons of social typing. Violence is often just a specialty—a skill, a craft, an efficient means to test the norms of and settle any challenge to the existing structure of power.

The Violence Profile is a set of indicators tracing aspects of the television world and of conceptions of social reality they tend to cultivate in the minds of viewers. Four specific types of indicators have been developed. Three come from message system analysis: (1) the context of programming trends against which any aspect of the world of television can be seen; (2) several specific measures of violence given separately and also combined in the Violence Index; and (3) structural characteristics of the dramatic world indicating social relationships depicted in it (in the present report, "risk ratios"). The fourth type of indicator comes from cultivation analysis and shows conceptions of reality related to television viewing. Although the Violence Profile is the most developed, the Cultural Indicators project is constructing similar profiles of other aspects and relationships of the media world.

Message system analysis has been performed on annual sample-weeks of prime time and weekend daytime network dramatic programming since 1967 by trained analysts who observe and code many aspects of TV content. The definition of violence employed in this analysis is "the overt-expression of physical force against self or other compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing." The research focuses on a clear-cut and commonly understood definition of violence, and yields indicators of trends in the programming context in which violence

FIGURE 1. Violence Index in Children's and Prime Time Programming, 1967-1979

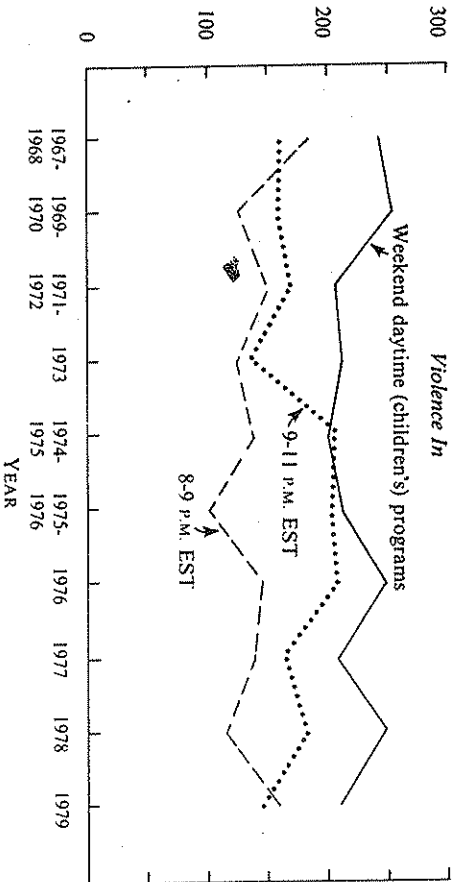
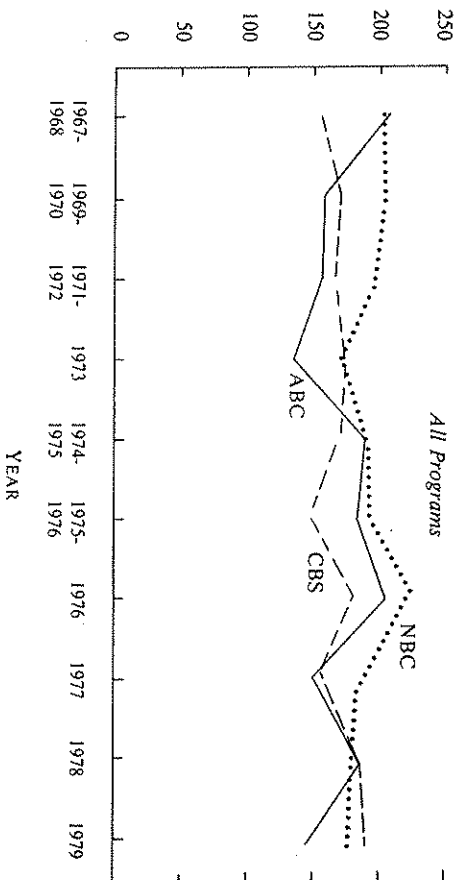


FIGURE 2. Violence Index by Network 1967-1979



occurs; in the prevalence, rate, and characterizations involved in violence; and in the power relationships expressed by the differential risks found in the world of television drama.

The Violence Index combines three sets of observations, measuring the extent to which violence occurs in the programs, its frequency and rate per program and per hour, and the number of roles calling for characterization as violent, victims, or both. The most noteworthy characteristic of trends shown in Figure 1 is their stability. Network differences, shown in Figure 2, are negligible.

The indicators reflected in the Violence Index are clear manifestations of what network programmers actually do as compared to what they say or intend to do. Network executives and their censorship ("Standards and Practices") offices maintain close control over the assembly line production process that results in the particular program mix of a season. While our data permit many specific qualifications to any generalization that might be made, it is safe to say that network policy seems to have responded in narrow terms, when at all, to very specific pressure, and only while the heat was on. After many years of investigations, hearings, and commissions (or since we have been tracking violence on television), seven out of every ten programs (nine out of every ten weekend children's hour programs) still contain some violence. The prime time rate of violent episodes is 6 per hour and the weekend daytime rate is 17 per hour. . . . Overall, about two thirds of the men and half of the women characters (but a much higher percentage in children's programs) have been involved in violence each year since 1969. When involved, women are more likely than men to be the victims of violence. Those cast in minority roles are especially more likely to be shown suffering rather than inflicting violence. . . .

It is clear, at least to us, that deeply rooted sociocultural forces, rather than just obstinacy or profit-seeking, are at work. We have suggested earlier in this article, and have also developed elsewhere, that symbolic violence is a demonstration of power and an instrument of social control serving, on the whole, to reinforce and preserve the existing social order, even if at an ever increasing price in terms of pervasive fear and mistrust and of selective aggressiveness. That maintenance mechanism seems to work through cultivating a sense of danger, a differential calculus of the risks of life in different groups in the population. The Violence Profile is beginning to yield indicators of such a mechanism, and thereby also a theory of basic structural and cultivation characteristics of television. . . .