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THERE IS NO FREE MARKET IN TELEVISION

*George Gerbner**

I will attempt to present a societal perspective which claims that violence is but the tip of the iceberg of a massive distortion in the way in which we make cultural policy in this country, and that it is dangerously out of democratic reach. I will also try to anticipate and deal with the major arguments about censorship, about guns, about whether it is a massive diversion of attention from more important things like poverty, about its effects on real-life violence and about the claim that "it is there because it is popular."

For the first time in human history, a child is born into a home in which television is on seven hours and 41 minutes a day. That means in most of our homes the television is turned on in the morning and turned off at night. It is part of the environment into which our children are born. This has never happened before.

For the first time in human history, most of our stories—for most children, most of the time—are told not by the parent, the school, the church, or the community. In fact, they are not told by anybody who has anything special to *tell*, and instead are told by, or on behalf of, a handful of global conglomerates that have something to *sell*. It is impossible to overestimate the radical change that this represents in human socialization.

A child today knows more brand-names of beer than names of American presidents. A ten-year-old is as likely to recognize Joe Camel, the symbol of the only industry that advertises a product that is guaranteed to kill if used as directed, as to recognize Mickey Mouse. That is not to say that Mickey Mouse, or even Disney, is my ideal of children's socialization, but they do not kill a thousand people a day. This is a historically unprecedented situation and it is a social structural condition, not just policy.

The amount of violence is perhaps not necessary to document. Five scenes per hour in prime time, three entertaining murders a

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night, twenty-five scenes of violence in children's Saturday morning programming—mostly cartoon programming sugarcoated with humor, which makes the pill easier to swallow. The question is, what is the pill? This is where there seems to be a kind of obsession with asking the wrong question.

The pill is power. Its basic lesson is: Who can get away with what, against whom? Violence is a complex social scenario of violators and victims. And it presents a very highly organized, repetitive, coherent image. For every ten violators on television—and we have been doing this monitoring for over 25 years, we have a database of well over 35,000 characters¹ and can give you all kinds of trend studies—for every ten violators, perpetrators of violence, there are about eleven victims.² For every ten women that are given that power—which usually belongs to white males in the prime of life—there are seventeen female victims.³ For every ten women of color who are given that kind of power, there are twenty-two victims of that group.⁴ So as the representation goes down—which, incidentally, is not a question of numbers, it is a question of opportunities of roles, of the breadth of growing up and feeling one's own potential or being deprived of feeling one's own potential—the victimization goes up.

The portrayal of violence is a key instrument in the making of minorities. Minorities are not born—and, of course, women are not a minority but a majority—minorities are culturally made by putting people into certain roles in a power structure.

These televised images are not merely violence as it has always been. They are saturating every home. There has never before been a system of violence presenting expertly choreographed, graphic scenes of brutality filling the cultural environment into which our children are born. This is historically unprecedented. This is not Shakespeare. This is not violence in the Bible, or in fairy tales, or in mythology. This is a tidal wave of mass-produced violent imagery such as the world has never seen.

Speaking of mythology, I would point out that the Greeks, who were supposed to have a cathartic effect of Greek tragedy, have never portrayed violence on the stage. Greek violence has always been off-

1. Cultural Indicators Database (on file with author).

2. *Id.*

3. *Id.*

4. *Id.*

stage. They portray the tragic consequences, which is a legitimate use of violence.

Violence is a legitimate artistic and journalistic feature. It is even necessary to show the tragedy, to show the pain, to show the damage that these compulsions create in human life and society. This is not what we are dealing with here. We are dealing with the formula-driven mass production of violence for entertainment, what I call "happy violence." It is swift, painless, effective, it is done by good guys as well as bad (and it is mostly guys as well as a few women who pay a much higher price for it, as I have suggested) and always leads to a happy ending. After all, you have to deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood. You cannot upset them. You cannot gross them out. You cannot disturb them.

There is a formula. That formula is imposed on the creative people. It is not an expression of freedom. It is an expression of a *de facto* censorship. And people in Hollywood, and even in broadcasting will tell you they hate it. A survey of television station managers shows that seventy-four percent say that they do not like the violent programs they get.⁵ Rather they say: "We have no choice. We are not producing them. They come in big packages. We cannot pick and choose. You have got to take it all."

If you think that the main reason for this historically unprecedented outpouring of violent imagery is that it sells, that it is popular, that people want it, I am urging you to think again. The ten highest-rated programs are typically nonviolent and have always been.⁶ We have just completed a study of over one hundred violent programs compared to over one hundred nonviolent programs aired at the same time and found for the last five years of the study, in every year the non-violent programs have had higher Nielsen ratings than the violent programs.⁷ In public opinion polls, up to eighty-five percent of respondents say there is too much violence on television. It is simply not true that this is an expression of a free market, that this is an expression of artistic or creative freedom. It is an expression of a global formula that makes violence travel well on the global market. Let me explain.

5. National Press Club Luncheon on TV Violence With: Senator Paul Simon, Sept. 16, 1993 (seventy-four percent of television station managers say that television is too violent).

6. Alf Siewers, *TV-Violence Link Elusive; Parents Seem Sure of Cause-and-Effect*, CHI. SUN TIMES, Oct. 26, 1994, at 7.

7. Pete Gallo, *Study: Non-violent Shows More Popular*, UPI, Oct. 5, 1994, available in LEXIS, Nexis Library, UPI File.

There is no free market in television. There are only a handful of buyers who buy most of the programs. They buy them wholesale and distribute them, discharge them into the common cultural environment in massive doses. Because there are only a few buyers, and little competition, the price they pay is low. The producers of television programs in the United States cannot break even on the domestic market. The producers are forced to go into syndication and onto the world market—where about half the profits come from—in order to break even and make a profit. When you know that you are going to mass produce for the world market, than you are thinking about an assembly line with a formula that travels well, that needs no translation, that speaks action in any language, that can be injected and be sold cheaply in many countries. Over years of trial and error, the industry has found that formula, that key ingredient: violence.

Thus violence becomes a part of a global formula imposed on the creative people and foisted on the children of the world despite the fact that it is not popular here and is not popular abroad. Every time a country invests sufficient amount of resources to produce a significant amount of its own programming, it is more popular than what they are importing. I am indebted to Todd Gitlin for the observation that it costs more to produce one minute of your own programming than to buy an hour's worth from the world market. Therefore, it presents an irresistible bargain to the hard-pressed governments and private broadcasters abroad and, indeed, to our broadcasters too if they want to make maximum profit.

What we are facing is not a simple policy question. What we are suggesting is not in the direction of censorship. On the contrary, it is an attempt to liberate the creative people, journalists, producers, writers, directors and actors from the *de facto* censorship imposed on them by a handful of global conglomerates who really do not care what the content of their production is but who are anxious to do well on the key formula, which is cost per thousand.

Cost per thousand—the key formula in television—is a ratio between the cost and the number of people reached. The number of people watching television is usually the same. People watch by the clock and not by the program. Given a certain number of people in a certain time slot, reducing the cost and increasing market worldwide is an unbeatable formula in that kind of a system. We are dealing with a structural condition which is out of democratic reach.

The approach I suggest is on several levels. The approach in the home is to become the critics, the analysts, the organizers who watch

enough to discuss it with our children and to offer an alternative view, which confers a great deal of immunity. As members of communities we must insist that our schools teach media literacy, media values, critical viewing, whatever you want to call it, that uses the critical skills that we are learning in language and social studies, in science classes, in history classes, and put it to work in an everyday cultural environment where our children live. As citizens, and as professionals in law, in the health professions and in many other professions, we have to look at the way in which our work is portrayed and get from that an indication of the kind of dysfunctions and distortions that stereotypic formulas impose. Women's groups and minority groups know very well that violence is the key element in the distribution of power in society.

To say there is no proof, that there is no direct cause and effect from violence in television to violence in life is essentially a disingenuous distraction. This is what the tobacco companies say: there is no proof that when you light up you are going to drop dead. And that is about the only proof they will accept. Of course there is no proof of that kind because this is not an observable connection. The proof that exists, and to which we are among the major contributors, is that this violence scenario sets up a cultural condition that has three major consequences.

Number one, it cultivates the notion that violence is normal; everyone is doing it. Given that notion, it may not be surprising that under certain circumstances some people, on some occasions, will act on it.

Secondly, and more importantly, it has a desensitizing effect. That means that we lose the ability to resist. We lose the ability to protest. We lose the ability to empathize. We lose the essence of civilization which is to have trust in human beings and be kind to strangers. In our society, that is lost.

The third and most debilitating consequence is an exaggerated sense of insecurity, of vulnerability, of dependence. It is a vast intimidation, which has enormous political fallout because it is so politically exploitable. You have a largely insecure population, mistrustful of people they do not know. When the people who are most vulnerable, virtually absent from our view of the world on television except as involved in crime, involved in drugs, setting up a dreadful distance and mistrust and fear. When you have this kind of a condition, you cannot run a successful election campaign without being harder on crime, harder on drugs, advocating harsher justice, advocating more

prisons, more capital punishment, more of all the things that have never worked to reduce violence but have never failed to get votes.

Most of what is now represented on the public agenda is basically asking the wrong question. The right question is: What are the lessons and the whole range of consequences of presenting life in that distorted way, despite its unpopularity? What are the forces that are driving it and how can we address those forces?

These are the issues that have been on the public agenda for many years in Parliament, have been discussed in the legislatures of France, Germany, Scandinavian countries, some Asian countries as well. These are the issues that are at the top of the agenda of the new developing systems in Central Europe and even in Russia and the former republics. The constitutional stalemate for most of those countries is about who will appoint the director of television. We have not even put this on the agenda. We have an invisible ministry of culture—a handful of people who decide what the people and children of the world will see—whose names we do not know, whom we have never elected, with whom we cannot engage in a representative policy decision-making process.

The purpose of grass-roots organizing, the purpose of building a coalition, is to begin catching up with other democracies, to begin the process of building some mechanism of public participation in cultural decision-making. We need to take the creative people at their word and say yes, we want you to have freedom to present life in a much greater diversity of situations, free from dictation by either public government or by private government. Private government being a handful of global conglomerates more powerful than many governments around the world.

We call this the Cultural Environment Movement.⁸ It offers a liberating alternative to repressive movements and to the bills pending in Congress that are, at best, Band-Aids on symptoms. None of them addresses the underlying structural conditions that drive the pathology.

8. George Gerbner, *TV is Too Violent Even Without Executions*, USA TODAY, June 16, 1994, at 12A; Pat Gilmore, *TV's Role in our Mean Streets*, DENV. POST, Jan. 23, 1994, at E-01.