

Global Media Mayhem

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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 such as the world has never seen. Images of expertly choreographed brutality drench our homes. There is no escape from the mass-produced mayhem pervading the life space of ever larger areas of the world.

Violence is but the tip of the iceberg of a massive underlying connection to television's role as universal story-teller and an industry dependent on global markets.

The roles children grow into are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, community-inspired. They are products of a complex, integrated and globalized manufacturing and marketing system. Television violence, defined as overt physical action that hurts or kills (or threatens to do so), is an integral part of that system.

Representations of violence are not necessarily undesirable. There is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. Not all violence is alike. In some contexts, violence can be a legitimate and even necessary cultural expression. Individually crafted, historically inspired, sparingly and selectively used expressions of symbolic violence can indicate the tragic costs of deadly compulsions. However, such tragic sense of violence has been swamped by "happy violence" produced on the dramatic assembly-line. This "happy violence" is cool, swift, painless, and often spectacular, even thrilling, but usually sanitized. It always leads to a happy ending; it must deliver the audience to the next commercial in a receptive mood.

The majority of network viewers have little choice of thematic context or cast of character types, and virtually no chance of avoiding violence. Nor has the proliferation of channels led to greater diversity of actual viewing. If anything, the dominant dramatic patterns penetrate more deeply into viewer choices through more outlets managed by fewer owners airing programs produced by fewer creative sources.

The average viewer of prime time television drama (serious as well as comedic) sees in a typical week an average of 21 criminals arrayed against an army of 41 public and private law enforcers. There are 14 doctors, 6 nurses 6 lawyers, and 2 judges to handle them. An average of 150 acts of violence and about 15 murders entertain them and their children every week, and that does not count cartoons and the news. Those who watch over 3 hours a day (more than half of all viewers) absorb much more.

Violence takes on an even more defining role for major characters. It involves more than half of all major characters (58 percent of men and 41 percent of women). Most likely to be involved either as perpetrators or victims, or both, are characters portrayed as mentally ill (84 percent), characters with mental or other disability (70 percent), young adult males (69 percent), and Latino/Hispanic Americans (64 percent). Children, lower class, and mentally ill or otherwise disabled characters, pay the highest price -- 13-16 victims for every 10 perpetrators.

Lethal victimization extends the pattern. About 5 percent of all characters and 10 percent of major characters are involved in killing (kill or get killed, or both). Being Latino/Hispanic, or lower class means bad trouble: they are the most likely to kill and be killed. Being poor, old, Hispanic or a woman of color means double-trouble, a disproportionate chance of being killed; they pay the highest relative price for taking another's life.

Among major characters, for every 10 "good" (positively valued) men who kill, about 4 are killed. But for every 10 "good" women who kill, 6 are killed, and for every 10 women of color who kill 17 are killed. Older women characters get involved in violence only to be killed.

We calculated a violence "pecking order" by ranking the risk ratios of the different groups. Women, children, young people, lower class, disabled and Asian Americans are at the bottom of the heap. When it comes to killing, older and Latino/Hispanic characters also pay a higher-than-average price. In other words, hurting and killing by most majority groups extracts a tooth for a tooth. But minority groups tend to pay a higher price for their show of force. That imbalance of power is, in fact, what makes them minorities even when, as women, they are a numerical majority.

What are the consequences? The symbolic overkill takes its toll on all viewers. However, heavier viewers in every subgroup express a greater sense of apprehension than do light viewers in the same groups. They are more likely than comparable groups of light viewers to overestimate their chances of involvement in violence; to believe that their neighborhoods are 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. Heavy viewers are also more likely to buy new locks, watchdogs, and guns "for protection." It makes no difference what they watch because only light viewers watch more selectively; heavy viewers watch more of everything that is on the air. Our studies show that they cannot escape watching violence. (See e.g. Gerbner, Morgan and Signorielli, 1944; Sun, 1989.)

Moreover, viewers who see members of their own group underrepresented but overvictimized seem to develop a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and alienation, what we call the "mean world syndrome." Insecure, angry people may be prone to violence but are even more likely to be dependent on authority and susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, hard-line postures. They may accept and even welcome repressive measures such as more jails, capital punishment, harsher sentences -- measures that have never reduced crime but never fail to get votes --if that promises to relieve their anxieties. That is the deeper dilemma of violence-laden television.

Formula-driven violence in entertainment and news is, therefore, not an expression of freedom, viewer preference, or even crime statistics. The frequency of violence in the media seldom, if ever, reflects the actual occurrence of crime in a community. It is, rather, the product of a complex manufacturing and marketing machine.

Mergers, consolidation, conglomeratization, and globalization speed the machine. Concentration brings denial of access to new entries and alternative perspectives. It places greater emphasis on dramatic ingredients most suitable for aggressive international promotion. Having fewer buyers for their products forces program producers into deficit financing. That means that most producers cannot break even on the license fees they receive for domestic airings. They are forced into syndication and foreign sales to make a profit. They need a dramatic ingredient that requires no translation, "speaks action" in any language and fits any culture. That ingredient is violence.

The rationalization for all that is that violence "sells." But what does it sell to whom, and at what price? There is no evidence that, other factors being equal, violence per se is giving most viewers, countries, and citizens "what they want." The most highly rated programs are usually not violent. In other words, violence may help sell programs cheaply to broadcasters in many countries despite the dislike of their audiences. But television audiences do not buy programs, and advertisers, who do, pay for reaching the available audience at the least cost.

We compared data from over 100 violent and the same number of non-violent prime-time programs

stored in the Cultural Indicators database. The average Nielsen rating of the violent sample was 11.1; the same for the non-violent sample was 13.8. The share of viewing households in the violent and nonviolent samples was 18.9 and 22.5, respectively. The amount and consistency of violence in a series further increased the gap. Furthermore, the non-violent sample was more highly rated than the violent sample for each of the five seasons studied.

However, despite their low average popularity, what violent programs lose on general domestic audiences they more than make up by grabbing younger viewers the advertisers want to reach and by extending their reach to the global market hungry for a cheap product. Even though these imports are typically also less popular abroad than quality shows produced at home, their extremely low cost, compared to local production, makes them attractive to the broadcasters who buy them.

Most television viewers suffer the violence daily inflicted on them with diminishing tolerance. Organizations of creative workers in media, health-professionals, law enforcement agencies, and virtually all other media-oriented professional and citizen groups have come out against "gratuitous" television violence. A March 1985 Harris survey showed that 78 percent disapprove of violence they see on television. A Gallup poll of October 1990 found 79 percent in favor 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 percent from 44 percent in 1983. Furthermore, 80 percent said entertainment violence was "harmful" to society, compared with 64 percent in 1983.

Local broadcasters, legally responsible for what goes on the air, also oppose the overkill and complain about loss of control. Electronic Media reported on August 2, 1993 the results of its own survey of 100 general managers across all regions and in all market sizes. Three out of four said there is too much needless violence on television; 57 percent would like to have "more input on program content decisions."

The Hollywood Caucus of Producers, Writers and Directors, speaking for the creative community, said in a statement issued in August 1993: "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."

Far from reflecting creative freedom, the marketing of formula violence restricts freedom and chills originality. The violence formula is, in fact, a de facto censorship extending the dynamics of domination, intimidation, and repression domestically and globally.

There is a liberating alternative. It exists in various forms in democratic countries. It is public participation in making decisions about cultural investment and cultural policy. Independent grass-roots citizen organization and action can provide the broad support needed for loosening the global marketing noose around the necks of producers, writers, directors, actors and journalists.

More freedom from violent and other inequitable and intimidating formulas, not more censorship, is the effective and acceptable way to increase diversity and reduce the dependence of program producers on the violence formula, and to reduce television violence to its legitimate role and proportion. The role of Congress, if any, is to turn its anti-trust and civil rights oversight on the centralized and globalized industrial structures and marketing strategies that impose violence on creative people and foist it on the children and adults of the world. It is high time to develop a vision of the right of children to be born into a reasonable free, fair, diverse and non-threatening cultural environment. It is time for citizen involvement in cultural decisions that shape our lives and the lives of our children.

About The Author

http://lass.calumet.purdue.edu/cca/gmj/SubmittedDocuments/archivedpapers/Fall2002/about_gerbner.htm

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