

THE REAL THREAT OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE

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My research associates and I have been working on defining and measuring the nature and effects of violence on television for almost a decade. We believe that the problem has been greatly oversimplified and distorted on *both* sides of the issue. Test it yourself by considering the following common propositions:

1. *The goal of violence is to hurt or kill.*
2. *All violence is basically alike.*
3. *Violence on television is like violence in movies and books.*
4. *Violence on television reflects a violent world.*
5. *The main danger of television violence is that it makes children (and perhaps other viewers) more aggressive and violent.*
6. *Scientists have no evidence so far that television viewing alone has any significant and systematic effect on behavior.*

Do these propositions sound plausible? Of course they do. But they are all false.

Violence is the expression of force intended to hurt or kill if necessary to accomplish a given goal. Except in a relatively few pathological cases, the goal is to dominate, to conquer, to control. But violence need not actually hurt or kill in order to be effective; it needs only to generate enough *fear* of being hurt or killed so that people will obey or acquiesce to something they otherwise would not do. Most violence,

“ . . . television generates fear . . . as well as aggression.”

from wars to muggings, is basically demonstration of power to compel action against the victim's will. Its immediate objective is fear and its more distant goal is power.

Telling the story of violence is not the same as committing it (although as a *show* of force, it may have the same end result). To strike out against brutality and injustice is not the same as to perpetrate them. When we see violence on television we do not call the police or an ambulance, but we absorb the *message* of the act. If the message helps us distinguish between just and unjust uses of power, the story of violence may be a legitimate dramatic element serving liberating ends. If the message is the gratuitous cultivation of prejudice and fear or of acquiescence to inhuman and unjust uses of power, or if it is a ritualistic and dramatically cheap solution to any conflict, it becomes a legitimate cause for serious concern.

Violence on television is *not* like that in movies or books because television is a very different medium. People don't have to know how to read or to go anywhere to see it. Television comes to the homes of all classes and groups, everywhere in the industrialized world. And it is used indiscriminately; most



Agents with guns drawn on The FBI.

people watch by the clock, not by the program, and the TV clock runs for over six hours a day in the average U.S. household. Therefore, TV *is* like the environment: it is everywhere; it is indivisible; it is inescapable. TV violence is but one consequence of the distribution of values and power in the world of television programming.

Ours may be a violent world, but television presents a distorted picture of its violence. The leading causes of injury and violent death are highway and industrial accidents, but we rarely see those on television. Rather, television presents such violence as can best serve its dramatic and social functions: to demonstrate how power works in society and show who can get away with what.

In demonstrating only selectively how power works and what types of people run what kinds of risks in life, television presents victims as well as victimizers, and generates fear, the real goal of violence, as well as aggression. Furthermore, in stereotyping people and their fates, television sets up a pattern of fear, so that some groups of people can exercise more power than others. Notions of fear, prejudice, and power are enhanced by violent television programming, and may have far-reaching consequences on the public's general thinking and behavior.

There *is* sufficient scientific evidence to conclude that television alone, as well as in combination with other social and cultural factors, makes a significant and systematic difference in the way viewers deal with reality. Such evidence comes from our long-range research project called Cultural Indicators, including the Violence Index and Profile, conducted for the Eisenhower Commission, the Surgeon General, the National Institute of Mental Health, and now also for the American Medical Association. The evidence shows that heavy viewing of television, independent of other facts of life, induces an exaggerated sense of danger, mistrust, and vulnerability. Irrationally fearful citizens may demand ever more protection and ultimately repression by the authorities as both a release from and a confirmation of their fears. Incitement of a small minority may be the price—a high price to be sure—we pay for the pacification of the vast majority through engendering a sense of fear and victimization. Symbolic violence achieves the purposes of real violence in setting up a scenario of domination and control through the manipulation of our fears. That is the ultimate menace of violence on television.

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