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ABOUT VIOLENCE

Road Runner Begets Rambo

By George Gerbner

TELEVISION VIOLENCE is making news again. The National Cable Television Association released my study which found an average of nearly 10 overtly violent physical acts per hour on both cable-originated and broadcast network programs, and much more on children's programming. While violence occurs "only" 17 times per hour in cable-originated children's programs, broadcast network children's programs boast an all-time high of 32 violent acts per hour. When these findings and some seemingly unmotivated, passionless assaults by youngsters hit the headlines simulta-

neously, I became a walking, talking media event, trapped on live radio from New Zealand to London and points between, trying to field a battery of questions.

"Children are out of control. What shall we do about violence on TV?" Or: "Why is this hackneyed old subject still with us, after all these years of study and controversy?" "Isn't this violence, after all, what people want?" "Didn't we all grow up with violence in a violent world?" "Isn't there violence in Shakespeare, fairy tales, the Bible?" And, on the other hand, "Isn't it obvious that violence begets violence; monkey see, monkey do?" Or "Nobody believes make-believe." "Isn't cartoon violence (remember Road Runner and the Wily Coyote) just good clean fun?" "Besides, we don't want censorship, do we?"

Let me try to answer here, freed from the tyranny of soundbites. Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with images of

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violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. Of course, there is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. Violence is a legitimate cultural expression, even

necessary to show the tragic consequences of deadly conflicts and lethal compulsions. But the historically limited, individually crafted and selectively used symbolic violence of great drama and good journalism, often conveying a tragic sense of life essential for human compassion, has been swamped by "happy violence": no pain, no permanent damage, just swift, effective, sanitized entertainment leading to happy endings.

Children who are steeped in the violence of cartoons and other fare soon graduate to scarcely less violent adult programming. The consequences of this cradle-to-grave exposure are threefold. For a few (whose acts provoke fright-

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ful publicity), violence seems an effective quick-fix to any problem. Many more become desensitized to violence and lose the ability to protest or to resist. And in nearly all of us, but especially in heavy TV viewers, lifelong exposure to images of violence generates a sense of insecurity and a demand for repression (more jails, more executions, more global policing) as long as it can be justified as enhancing our security. Heavy viewers live in a meaner world than their next-door neighbors who watch less television, and they act accordingly.

Humor is the sugar-coating on the pill. The pill is power: Who can get away with what against whom. Women and minorities in television drama tend to be underrepresented and over-victimized. This is the lethal "pecking order": Men kill twice as frequently as they are killed. "Good" men, the heroes of television drama, kill three times as frequently as they are killed. "Good" women, the heroines, are killed as often as they kill; a tooth for a tooth. Women of color are killed twice as often as they kill. Older women are written into violent scripts only to get killed. In the mean world of television violence, men kill and women get killed.

This projection of male power starts early in life. Don't just blame the kids or even only the parents. For the first time in human history, most of the stories in our society are being told not by parents, schools, churches or communities with something to tell, but increasingly by global conglomerates with something to sell.

Most highly rated programs are not violent, but they are more expensive to produce and don't travel as well on the global market. Violence is good business because it is relatively cheap to produce, it needs no translation or thoughtful comprehension, and it speaks action in any language. Shows can be sold dirt-cheap abroad, where big media profits come from.

Cheap "happy violence" is the result of a de-facto censorship foisted on our children, our culture, and our creative people by global marketing formulas. To counter it requires not more censorship but, on the contrary, the loosening of the existing marketing noose on creativity and cultural freedom.

Parents need the help of schools to teach media literacy. We all need to act as citizens and form a Cultural Environment Movement to address such problems as TV violence much as we are beginning to address global warming, by recognizing its roots, and building a constituency for democratic participation in cultural decision-making.