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New Catholic World

Published Since 1865

Vol. 221 No. 1322 Mar./Apr. 1978

Published by Paulist Press

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New Catholic World is published bi-monthly by Paulist Press. Editorial Office: 1865 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023. Phone: 212-265-8181. Business Office: 545 Island Road, Ramsey, N.J. 07446. Phone: 201-825-7300. Cover price: \$1.50. One year subscription, \$7.00, two years, \$13.00, three years, \$18.00. Add \$1.00 per year for Canada, \$1.50 per year for foreign. Air mail subscription, \$18.50 per year. For change of address send the mailing label with old address from a recent issue together with new address, including zip code. Allow 30 days for change. *New Catholic World* is indexed in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature. *New Catholic World* is available on microfilm from University Microfilms, Inc., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Mich. Copyright ©1978 by the Missionary Society of St. Paul the Apostle in the State of New York. All rights reserved. Second class postage paid at Ramsey, N.J. and at additional mailing offices. Publication #812060. The opinions expressed herein are those of the individual writers alone and do not necessarily represent the view of the Paulist Fathers.

TELEVISION AS NEW RELIGION

George Gerbner
with
Kathleen Connolly

Perhaps the most widely-held misconception about television is that it is a medium among other media. Television is perceived by many as a medium that differs from other forms of mass media only in form. The conclusion that results is that television has the same effect on people as do print, movies, theater, and radio, that television can be analyzed in the same fashion, and that its portrayal of reality is analogous to the representations found in print, on stage and the movie screens, and over the air waves.

The truth of the matter is that the special characteristics of television set it apart from other mass media in a way that makes comparison shaky at best. In order to understand the role that television plays in the lives of viewers, it is necessary to understand how radically different television is from all other media.

1. Television consumes more time and more attention of more people than all other media and leisure activ-

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ities combined. In the average American home, the television set is on for six and one-quarter hours a day.

2. Television requires no mobility. Unlike movies or the theater, you do not have to go out to watch television. It is there in the home, available at any time.

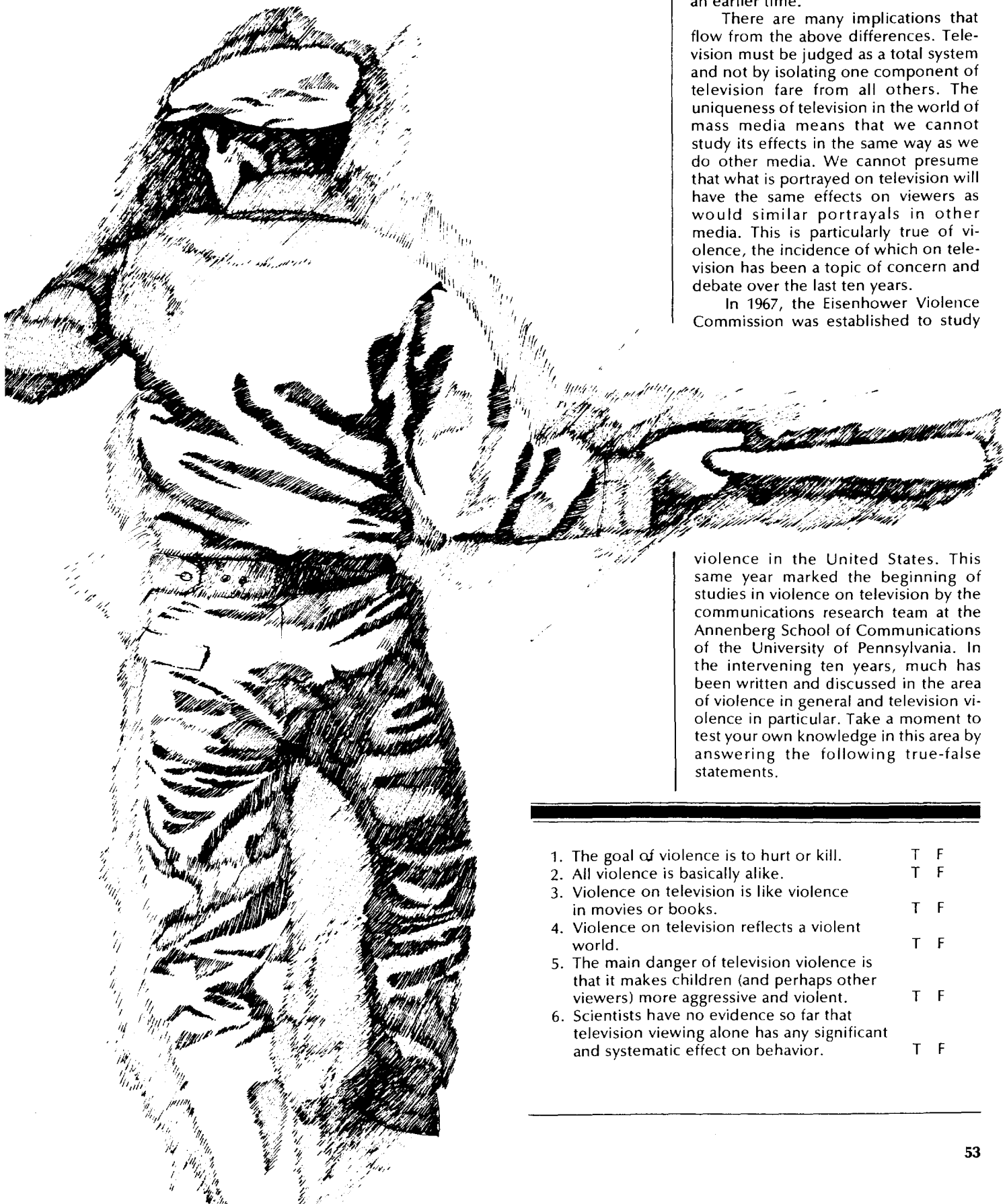
3. Television does not require literacy. Unlike print, it provides information about the world to the poorly educated and the illiterate. In fact, for those who do not read (by choice or inability), television is a major source of information, much of which comes from what is called entertainment.

4. Unlike most other mass media, television is "free" (supported by a privately imposed tax on all goods). Unlike radio, which many see as the media form closest to television, television both shows *and* tells.

5. All media are symbol systems. This is as true of television as of any other mass media. However, as a symbol system, television is unique in all of history. There is little age-grading of the symbolic materials that socialize members into the community. Television tells its stories to people of all age

groups all at the same time. Television presents its message to a heterogenous audience. People of all ages, races, ethnic groups, economic groups, etc., see the same message, and, most importantly, unlike books, movies, etc., most people use television *non-selectively*.





This means that minority groups have their image formed by the dominant interests of the larger culture. Television presents a total world of meaning whose relationship to the state is not unlike that of the Church in an earlier time.

There are many implications that flow from the above differences. Television must be judged as a total system and not by isolating one component of television fare from all others. The uniqueness of television in the world of mass media means that we cannot study its effects in the same way as we do other media. We cannot presume that what is portrayed on television will have the same effects on viewers as would similar portrayals in other media. This is particularly true of violence, the incidence of which on television has been a topic of concern and debate over the last ten years.

In 1967, the Eisenhower Violence Commission was established to study

violence in the United States. This same year marked the beginning of studies in violence on television by the communications research team at the Annenberg School of Communications of the University of Pennsylvania. In the intervening ten years, much has been written and discussed in the area of violence in general and television violence in particular. Take a moment to test your own knowledge in this area by answering the following true-false statements.

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

These statements all *sound* correct, but are false. Let us examine why these statements are erroneous.

1. The goal of violence is to hurt or kill. Violence actually has two objectives, which we might call immediate and ultimate. The immediate goal of violence is *fear*. In order to be effective, violence need not hurt or kill. It is only necessary that violence generate a fear of pain or death in its victim. The ultimate goal of violence is the *power* to control behavior of others. Having generated fear of pain or death in the victim, violence moves toward its ultimate goal of power. If fear is created, the aggressor has then gained the power to make the victim do some-

thing that he or she would not ordinarily do. This is true of all forms of violence, from muggings to war. Only in a relatively few pathological cases is violence itself the goal or purpose of a violent act.

2. All violence is basically alike. The presentation of a violent scene carries a message with it. A violent act might be committed to thwart injustice or brutality, or to perpetrate them. In each case, the message of the act will be vastly different. The outcry against television violence is not directed at acts of violence which, by helping people to distinguish just and unjust uses of power, serve a legitimate, dramatic purpose. Rather, the area of concern is violence

that cultivates fear and prejudice, or the inhuman and unjust use of power.

3. Violence on television is like violence in books and movies. As we have noted above, television is different from all other mass media. The ubiquitous nature of television means that television violence will have different effects from violence that is read, seen, or heard selectively.

4. Violence on television reflects a violent world. Television distorts the violence found in reality. Highway and industrial accidents are the leading causes of violent death and injury in this country. One would never know that from watching television. Violence on television portrays how power



works in society and who can get away with what.

5. The main danger of television violence is that it makes children (and perhaps other viewers) more aggressive and violent. The real effect of television violence is the result of the selective and stereotypical portrayals of power and people in society. Television shows us who are the victims and who are the aggressors. It demonstrates who has power and who will have to acquiesce to that power. Television violence achieves the immediate goal of violence, the generation of fear. This fear, and the power that can be achieved because of it, are the main dangers of television violence to all viewers, children and adults alike.

6. Scientists have no evidence so far that television alone has any significant and systematic effect on behavior. As we will show below, there is evidence regarding the effect of television viewing on the way people deal with reality. The evidence shows that heavy television viewing creates an exaggerated sense of danger, mistrust and vulnerability.

What is the actual incidence of violence on television? What groups are most likely to be victims of television violence, and which are most likely to be aggressors? The Violence Index, one component of the Violence Profile, is a composite of measures of the prevalence, rate and characterizations involved in violent action. The Violence Index, based on an analysis of a fall 1976 sample of prime time, late evening and weekend daytime network television dramatic programming, will enable us to see graphically how violence is portrayed on television (2). This analysis focused on clear-cut and unambiguous physical expression of overt violence in any context.

In an overall summary of the incidence of violence, we find that 74.9% of all characters were involved in some violent action, and that 89.1% of all programs contained some violence. The saturation of programs with violence, indicated by the rate of violent episodes, was 6.2 per play and 9.5 per hour. These figures all represent increases in the figures for 1975.

A closer look at the specifics of television violence is found in the Violence-Victim Ratio. These Ratios are obtained by dividing the more numerous of the two roles by the less numerous within each group. A plus sign indicates that there are more aggressors or killers than victims or killed, and a minus sign indicates that there are

more victims or killed than aggressors or killers.

Since 1969 when this measure was developed, the overall Violence-Victim Ratio is -1.21 , meaning that for every aggressor there were 1.21 victims. While the overall victimization ratio for men is -1.20 , for women it is higher: -1.32 . This means that female viewers are more likely to see a female victimized than a male. This leads to serious questions about the effect of television viewing on a woman's sense of her own safety.

Are there particular groups which have a high rate of victimization? A look at the following summary (2) will show which groups in the television population have high victimization rates. Minus signs indicate more victims than aggressors or killers.

Group	Violent-Victim Ratio
"Bad" characters (both sexes)	-1.02
"Good" characters (both sexes)	-1.28
Non-whites (both sexes)	-1.40
Unmarried women	-1.50
Children	-1.73
Lower class women	-2.25
Non-white women	-2.50
Old women	-3.00

It is interesting to note that while the overall Violent-Victim Ratio has declined from -1.25 in 1975 to -1.06 in 1976, the relative power positions of groups has remained the same. Television makes a very strong statement about who in society can expect to be the victims of violence, and what groups may be expected to exert that power. Of further interest to us here is the context in which violent action occurs. On television, violence rarely stems from close personal relationships. Yet according to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, statistics compiled in 1969 show that only 16% of actual homicides occur between strangers, while 64% involved family members or friends (1).

Research thus far has shown us that television has a very definite lesson to teach about the perpetrators and victims of violence. In a much broader sense, television teaches a lesson about the social constructs of our world. Television is a medium of socialization of most people into standardized roles and behavior. Its function is, in short, enculturation. Television viewers are exposed daily to a value system acted out within the framework of "entertainment." People can and do learn values from television: what roles people play (and are expected to play) in our society, what types of behavior are socially accepta-

ble, what characteristics are prized in our society. We need only examine the casting of television programming to see the roles and behavior patterns offered as standard fare (1).

Three out of every four leads are males. These males tend to be American, middle- and upper-class and in the prime of life. Only one in three of these male leads has ever been or is intending to be married. Women, on the other hand, represent a romantic or family interest. Their roles almost always carry some suggestion of sex. Two out of three female leads are married or expect to be married. Nearly half of them come from the sexually eligible young adult population, as compared to one-fifth of the males. Women are disproportionately represented among the very young and the very old. Children, adolescents and old people account for less than fifteen per cent of the total fictional population. In the total population of the television world, men outnumber women four to one.

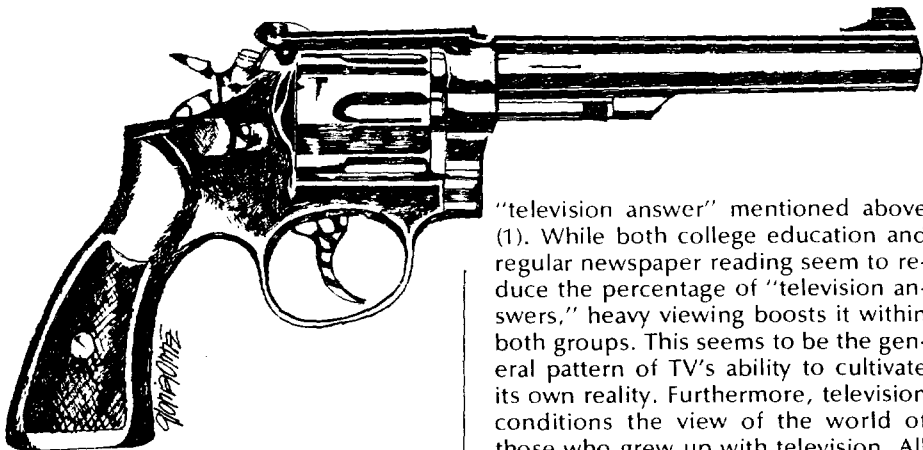
In terms of employment, five in ten characters can be clearly identified as gainfully employed. Three of these five hold what we would call managerial or professional positions. One-fifth of all characters specialize in violence as either law breakers or law enforcers.

The logical conclusion of our examination of the "world" constructed by television is that it enforces and maintains conventional beliefs, conceptions and behaviors. The small percentage of very young and very old people who comprise television's world reinforces America's infatuation with youth and the "prime of life." Women's roles support the traditional stereotypes of women prevalent in society. Only recently have shows begun to move away from a particular set of economic (middle and upper middle class) and cultural (white American) presuppositions.

With regard to violence in particular, 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 transgression of society's rules. Violence-laden drama shows who gets away with what, when, why, how and against whom. A major worry about television violence is that it will teach aggressive people new means of being aggressive against others. Without minimizing this concern, an even more critical result of television violence may be what it teaches people about being victims. It is to this effect of television's influence that we must now turn our attention.

These results of television viewing have been studied in a research project called Cultural Indicators, a periodic study of television programs and conceptions of social reality that viewing cultivates. Before going on to the actual results, it is important to note the two steps in this particular research (1).

1. 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 the composition and structure of the symbolic world. Dramatic programs are studied with regard to geography, demography, thematic and action structure, time and space dimensions, personality profiles, occupations and fate.



One can object that light and heavy viewers are different prior to—and aside from—television. The present research, as well as other studies, indicates that heavy viewing is part of a complex syndrome that includes lower education, lower mobility, higher anxieties, and other class-, age- and sex-related characteristics. Television viewing helps to cultivate elements of that syndrome, but it also makes a separate and independent contribution to the “biasing” of conceptions of social reality within most age, sex, educational, and other groupings, including those most presumably “immune” to its effects.

The extent of television “bias” is best indicated by studying the breakdown of figures for those giving the

“television answer” mentioned above (1). While both college education and regular newspaper reading seem to reduce the percentage of “television answers,” heavy viewing boosts it within both groups. This seems to be the general pattern of TV’s ability to cultivate its own reality. Furthermore, television conditions the view of the world of those who grew up with television. All the figures show that the “under 30” respondents exhibit consistently higher levels of “television answers,” despite the fact that they tend to be better educated than “over 30” respondents.

Let us look at two of the questions used in the survey and examine how light viewers compared with heavy viewers. The “television answer” corresponds to the world portrayed by TV, while the alternative is slanted more in the direction of reality.

1. What proportion of people are employed in law enforcement?

Television answer: 5%

Alternative: 1%

Heavy viewers (those watching an average of four hours a day or more) were always more likely to give the television answer, even among those viewers who are college educated or read newspapers regularly. Television thus cultivates an exaggerated idea of how many people are law enforcement agents. Of more serious concern is the possibility that TV also creates an exaggerated idea of the need for such

officials. This is reflected in the answers to the following question.

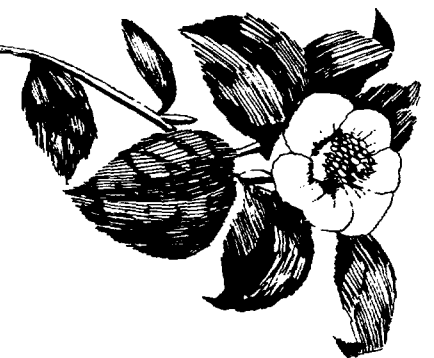
2. What is your own chance of being involved in violence in any given week?

Television Answer: 1 in 10

Alternative: 1 in 100

Again, heavy viewers were always more likely to give the television answer. This may help to explain why recent studies have shown that respondents’ estimates of danger in their own neighborhoods had little to do with crime statistics or even their own experience. Symbolic violence may cultivate exaggerated assumptions about the extent of threat and danger in the world and lead to demands for protection.

The net result of this research indicates that the effect of symbolic violence is very different than we might at first assume. A heightened sense of



risk and insecurity (different for groups of varying power) is more likely to increase acquiescence to and dependence upon established authority, and to legitimize its use of force, than it is to threaten the social order through occasional imitations of criminal violence.

This general trend seems to be true of other aspects of social reality. TV appears to cultivate assumptions that fit its socially functional myths—myths regarding age, sexual stereotyping, cultural backgrounds, who in society is powerful and who acquiesces to that power. These myths form a value system that is presented almost twenty-four hours a day, every day, in millions of homes across the country. Television may indeed be the established religion of the industrial order. ●

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