

GEORGE GERBNER

Guest columnist

TV distorts world, makes many fearful

PHILADELPHIA — The debate about television violence has become a tedious and frustrating charade.

Networks insist that violence does not "cause" most real violence — something no responsible researcher ever claimed.

Politicians exploit the issue as a safe legislative dead-end.

Reformers use it to press their claims.

Social scientists note the obvious fact that growing up viewing 18 acts of violence and at least two entertaining murders on an average evening teaches acceptance of violent solutions and ways of life.

But that is not the main lesson of television violence. Our long-range research project called Cultural Indicators, now in its 17th year, shows even more pervasive and far-reaching associations.

With the set on for seven hours a day in the average home, the tidal wave of television violence (that shows no sign of receding) tends to cultivate a sense of living in a mean world of danger and insecurity.

The more we watch television the more we demand protection and accept repression if it promises to alleviate insecur-

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ity.

Far from only creating threats to the social order, our research shows that violence tends also to make heavy viewers more dependent and more accepting of inequity and injustice than are light viewers in the same types of homes and neighborhoods.

Violence demonstrates and perpetuates a system of power. It teaches who can get away with what against whom.

Our study of thousands of TV drama characters shows the "pecking order" of the mean world of television. TV subjects women, minorities, poor, and young or old people to a higher rate of victimization (compared to their ability to inflict violence) than middle class white males in the prime of life.

Domination and control is the message behind the superficial debate that focuses only on occasional aggression — but ignores this pattern of pervasive victimization.