

FAX COVER SHEET

THE ANNENBERG SCHOOL FOR
COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

3620 Walnut Street Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-6220

FAX# (215) 898-2024
PHONE# (215) 898-7041

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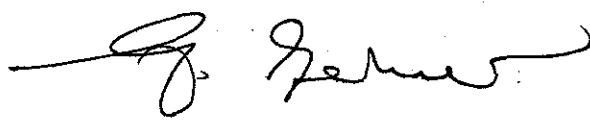
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ATTN: J. F. FENNELLY M.D.
Morrisform Memorial Hospital

FAX# 201 971 5657

FROM: G. GERBNER

Dear Mr. Fennelly - Thank you for
the excellent and useful statement
You may be interested in the
attached.

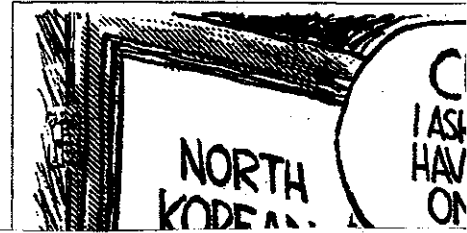


"USA TODAY hopes to serve as a forum for better understanding and unity to help make the USA truly one nation."

—Allen H. Neuharth
Founder, Sept. 15, 1982



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TV is too violent even without executions

Reject those who would be voyeurs of agony, feeding meanness and repression.

By George Gerbner

David Lawson died in the North Carolina gas chamber Wednesday without the benefit of TV cameras. As by now almost everyone knows, talk-show host Phil Donahue petitioned the Supreme Court of North Carolina to be permitted to televise the execution. The court turned him down.

Some say, as Donahue did in his petition, that the denial "not only prevents effective public evaluation of the practice [of execution], but severely hampers whatever deterrent effect such punishment may have."

Others believe, as I do, that the ghoulish spectacle of an archaic barbarism, abandoned by every other Western industrial country, is neither good reporting nor a deterrent.

Good reporting illuminates the invisible dynamics of cause and effect, values and behavior, acts and consequences. Sights

and sounds do not report but transport the event to a public arena where it had been a source of amusement in times both medieval and brutal.

Available evidence suggests that television executions would further desensitize and brutalize a public already punch-drunk on television violence. They would serve only to exploit a thirst for retribution and vengeance.

We do not have an epidemic of violence. If anything, homicides have declined in the past decade. We have an epidemic of executions driven by insecurity and anger which is, in turn, generated by a historically unprecedented tidal wave of violent imagery on TV.

Witnessing real-live executions in the entertainment and marketing setting of television would further cater to that anxiety, violate the right to privacy in the most intimate moments of life, such as death, subject the families involved to further anguish and heighten the international embarrassment already created by the fact that we export 30% more violent programs than we even air at home.

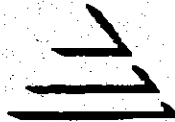
Thirty years ago, the majority of the public was opposed to capital punishment.

Then, as television violence saturated the airways, the "mean world syndrome" that we discovered in our research on TV violence helped change the public mood.

The exposure from infancy on to an average of five scenes of violence per hour and three entertaining murders a night, plus violence on the news, created a vastly exaggerated impression of danger and vulnerability. This led to the demand for harsher punishment and more jails in the already most jail-happy country in the civilized world. Political exploitation followed; these measures have never reduced crime but have never failed to get votes.

The clamor to become voyeurs of agony can only feed the fires of meanness and repression. It should be resisted rather than assisted by those who believe that good reporting is valid perspective rather than just vivid spectacle and that addressing the root causes of crime is the best deterrent.

George Gerbner is professor and dean emeritus at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School for Communication and founder of the Cultural Environment Movement.



MORRISTOWN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

100 MADISON AVENUE / MORRISTOWN, NEW JERSEY 07962-1956

A Major Teaching Affiliate of The Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons

Telephone:

TELEFACSIMILE TRANSMISSION

NAME OF RECEIVER: PROF George Gerban

COMPANY: _____

DEPARTMENT: COMM

RECEIVER'S TELEPHONE #: 215 898 2024

NAME OF SENDER: J. F. Fennelly

SENDER'S TELEPHONE #: _____

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MORRISTOWN MEMORIAL HOSPITAL TELEFACSIMILE CONTACT #: 201-971-5657

WE ARE ALL ABUSED AND VICTIMS!

We agonize over the tragedy of indescribable violence—the murdered, the murderer(s), its effect on the children, the family, the survivors, the friends. The mayhem is made worse by the loss of a media-hero of mythological proportions, O. J. Simpson. For a long moment we are confused by who are the good guys and who are bad guys...The police acting with such ambiguity and the media turning against one of it's most visible members.

What we may not realize is that we as a society are part of the victimization and abuse. This in my view occurred because of the bewilderment, the curiosity, that kept us fixed to the TV. TV is background noise for a lot of folk...it keeps us "in touch" with the rest of the world, and with our neighbors. After all football is the ultimate Common-Cause. Is there any religious event that could challenge Super-Bowl Sunday? O.J.'s fame and the game are inextricably bound-up in a violent sport...I am starting to think that "sportsman like" conduct may be another oxymoron. Something we wouldn't want our children to learn.

To amplify the subtle perversion was that violence was added on in a subtle belief that "news" was the made-for-TV Life of O. J. Simpson. Anyone answering honestly would acknowledge that the scene last Friday was hypnotic and mesmerizing. The visual media, the helicopters, with their advanced media technology, swept over the scene as if the camera eye was that of some Celestial Olympian God observing from above!

Despite all of this we were witnessing a private matter? The good and evil that men play out ought to be kept from our "living" rooms (another oxymoron, since "Living" implies to think and feel to experience.) What was missing was the whole experience? How do we stay out of harm's way? Do we know what is harmful? Could there have been bloodshed? It's too simple to expect that our demythologized hero, would meet his just reward by a suicide on camera. (And not a simple candid video, but the best TV has to offer) Its just too simple, spray bullets could hurt the 'innocent'. Furthermore we get wounded by the sound-bytes (bights). Life has a way of extracting justice! We pay the price of depersonalization and of dehumanization.

How then can we stay out of harms' way? Nature has developed some fairly reliable mechanisms. In a former and more simple time, when, in the presence of danger, our early warning systems would alert us. We develop a rapid pulse, we sweat, may regurgitate—we may lose control of our sphincters. Among other reflexes, the olfactory apparatus, the sense of smell, sends a powerful and instantaneous biochemical message to our old cortex, the paleocortex, the part of the brain that acts instinctively. There occurs an instant response—one of flight and fright...we fight, freeze or flee!

The electronic waves which sent this scene into our living rooms do not come equipped with sensors to alert us to danger. No "elections-waves" of nausea, or at, another level of repulsion, of guilt, shame, denial, of public ridicule, of anger of disbelief are sent. The message is ~~and~~ stripped of their human

to

experience. So what, No sweat!! We are not prone to rethink the distortions of the message.

What then are the effects? We divide and dissociate sound and sight feelings and thoughts from ourselves, our emotions may become desensitized to harm.

And what is more important we are in jeopardy of dissociating our psycho-spiritual intuitive wholeness. What Robert Lifton called "doubling" and "psychic numbness" (as he explained the Nazi Doctors work in the death camps.)

The roots of violence are nourished when there is a breakdown of our biological, psychological, and spiritual integrity. When we separate ourselves from the suffering of others. When we unthinkingly allow the media to frame the message. Heretofore, I thought we were protected from the great media-maven, Marshall Mc Luhan, when he predicted that "the medium is (not only) the message, but the massage"; that is that "all media works us over completely, ...leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered."

Issues of Violence, of abuse are cardinal problems for our society. This tragedy has sensitized the public to the need to confront the total victimization that wife abuse creates.

We can not blame the media alone, we as members of a society must use this experience to craft sound principles and practices that protect first amendment rights, of free speech, of free press, of free media. At the same time we must protect our environments, be they electron, virtual reality or unaltered and individual reality. If we are to further reduce the unnecessary and added violence added to the tragedy of murder and suffering survivors, then blame, defensiveness, shame, must be rejected for authentic dialogue

Chairman, Ethics Committee
Medical Society, N.J.

JOSEPH F FENNELLY, MD
8 SHUNPIKE RD.
MADISON, N.J. 07940

201 377 6216
7271(H)