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COULD TELEVISION VIOLENCE BE <u>GOOD</u> FOR PEOPLE?

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Abstract: In spite of the general agreement that televised violence has adverse effects upon individuals and society, it is not impossible that the phenomenon has been misunderstood, and that the actual effects are positive. The scientific literature on the topic is not decisive. The attack on televised fantasy violence can be framed as an attack on popular culture by its detractors.

During 1993 and 1994 televised fantasy violence underwent yet another round in the recurrent contest with its authoritative critics (and according to one study [Kolbert, 1994], emerged in more robust form than ever). At one point the violent content was the target of no less than nine Congressional bills, each intending by one means or another to curb its dissemination. Reed Hundt, the chairman of the Federal Communications Comission, lent his support to the effort, as did Attorney General Janet Reno, who ventured that the regulation of television violence was constitutionally permissable (Wines, 1993). Appearing to capitulate to the threat of restrictions, the television industry in the spring of 1994 took modest steps in the direction of self-regulation.

Politicians would have been unlikely to challenge a thriving American enterprise had there not been widespread support. Within the academic community there is broad agreement that viewing television violence does stimulate real-world aggression. The well-known longitudinal study by

Professor Leonard Eron, which would seem to document a causal relationship between violence viewing and antisocial behavior,[1] was cited time and again by violence critics as representative of the scholarly research. This consensus among academics had been documented a few years earlier in George Comstock's review of the pertinent studies: "The now-sizeable literature--over 1,000 articles, including reviews--gives considerable empirical support to the hypothesis that exposure to TV violence increases the likelihood of subsequent aggressive or antisocial behavior" (1990, p. 32). The public, while not noticeably changing its viewing habits, does claim to agree with the experts; a 1994 Harris poll disclosed that 61 percent of a national sample of adults felt that television violence contibuted to crime.

To argue against all this, to argue that televised fantasy violence is actually beneficial to its viewers and to society, can only seem like a foolhardy task. Yet, heretical as it may appear at first, that is the objective of this paper, which attempts to sketch an alternative position. This counterproposal will necessitate a revisiting of the scientific literature, a call for the self-analysis of one's own viewing, and a proposed reconceptualization of the cultural forces at work which manifest themselves disguised as a reformist anti-violence campaign.

It must be conceded at the outset that there is one conspicuous group made undeniably hostile by television violence. When members of the Academy confront resistance to the general condemnation of fantasy

violence, when they meet the opposing argument, they can become outraged. Why they become so livid, in what ought to be a tempered intellectual debate, will prove to be revealing about the real issues at stake.

Scientific studies on the subject of violence viewing--the "over 1,000 articles" which Comstock referred to--comprise one of the larger literatures in social science, and certainly the largest single literature in the field of communication studies. The effort is designed to answer what looks like a well-wrought question: Does the viewing of television fantasy violence produce increased levels of aggressive behavior? But buried in this deceptively simple query are several rarely exposed assumptions. One is the assumption of causality--that the relationship between the programming and the viewer is one of cause-and-effect. Many other kinds of relationships are conceivable; we would not ask if a sister "caused" a brother, if the water glass "caused" the water. But here it is assumed from the start that the relationship is either a causal one, or it is not; no other possibility can be admitted. Constructed this way, the inquiry also assumes that the direction of causation is one-way. The idea that causation might flow as well from the viewership back to the medium is an idea that cannot be entertained. Viewer preferences, which rule in the real world of the television industry, have no

place in the flattened world of this inquiry. Since it is assumed that television is a cause and that the effects are to appear (or not) upon viewers, there is built into this investigation certain notions of the medium and the audience: that television is powerful, a prime mover, and viewers are weak, impressionable. Nowhere in this formulation is there room to acknowledge that viewers independently construct meanings which may be very different from what appears on the screen (Gunter, 1988). So, before an iota of work is done, because of the way the question is set, an agenda has been established that constitutes the medium as a possibly evil behemoth, the viewer as a hapless wretch, and the investigators as people who may be in the position to do good, should the findings come out "right." When an intellectual effort starts out hobbled by this sort of format and its burden of assumptions, it cannot be surprising that eventually a few scholars, such as James Carey, would grow suspicious and counsel resistance. Carey has eloquently urged his colleagues to move away from the "effects tradition" (1989).

Let's come back to the question itself, and call the question into question: Of all possible explorations into the relationships between the medium and the audience, why is this particular question raised so often and so insistently? It has the appearance of being not so much a knowledge-seeking query as an accusatory proposition. The massiveness of the search for the adverse regarding television might be more telling about the searchers than the sought. The controlling of inappropriate hostility is a

central preoccupation of all societies, past and present; are those critical of the popular medium using this abiding concern with social aggression as a convenient indictment, one that masks other motives on their parts? What might such other motives be? (Of course, it cannot hurt their cause that fantasy violence and real aggression might seem to be similar. Only upon reflection does the gulf between symbolic fantasy and palpable reality become clear.)

Given the unexamined and constraining assumptions at the heart of the inquiry, given the massiveness and single-mindedness of the effort, it is perhaps odd that the findings which have resulted are less than unanimous and less than pronounced. The consensus which the popular press and the public believe is exhibited within the scientific literature on violence viewing, and the supposed decisiveness of the findings, is simply not there. George Comstock may feel certain that general agreement has been achieved, but that agreement might be located more in the eye of the beholder than in the actualities of the literature. A contrasting review of the literature has been reported by Jonathan Freedman, head of the psychology department at the University of Toronto (1988). After rereading all the leading studies published from the 1950's onwards, Freedman concludes that the literature "... provides little or no support for the notion that viewing television violence causes an increase in aggression, and that it might even be considered nonsupportive or contradictory to that idea" (p. 146). Freedman notes that some (but certainly not all) laboratory studies indicate that violent programs

can stimulate aggression in children, but suggests these findings are most likely to stem from "localized social learning": the young subjects are influenced by the fact that adult experimenters have chosen to show them (and thus to endorse) violent content, and when the subjects' experimental task follows, the children may tend to comply in the way they feel they have been guided. As have other students of the literature, Freedman also questions the extent that laboratory behaviors will occur in the real world. The few field experiments which have been done should provide less hypothetical answers, but according to Freedman the results from this line of research are "neither consistent nor strong" (p. 150). The burden of proof then falls upon correlational studies, which compare measures of violence viewing to measures of aggressive behavior. Even if accepted, this body of research can link only between 1 and 4 percent of total aggressive or antisocial behavior to violence viewing. Freedman observes that simply because these two factors might co-occur does not prove their relationship is a causal one. In particular, Freedman finds the longitudinal correlational studies conducted by Leonard Eron and his associates to be damaged by inconsistent findings and analyses. Freedman summarizes, "My own conclusion is that, considering all of the research--laboratory, field experiments, and correlational studies--the evidence does not support the idea that viewing television violence causes aggression" (158).

Two of the more recent research publications on the topic are indicative of the non-consensual nature of the violence literature. In the first

study, data were collected from a sample of siblings aged 11 to 16 regarding violence viewing, aggression, and personality traits (Lynn, Hampson & Agahi, 1989). If violence viewing produces aggressive behavior, then it would stand to reason that higher levels of such viewing would result in increased aggression; this study, however, could determine no such relationship. Aggressive behavior was not more prevalent among the older (and thus more violence-exposed) children, nor, within families, were the siblings who viewed more televised violence demonstrated to be more aggressive than their brothers and and sisters. "These zero correlations show that there is no causal relationship between the amount of viewing of TV violence and aggression," the authors report (p. 160).

In the second study sociologist Steven F. Messner hypothesized, as would most academics, that "...there will be a significant, positive relationship between levels of exposure to television violence and rates of violent crime" (1986, p. 220). Using Nielsen data, Messner first computed the audience sizes in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas for the five most violent television programs in the 1980 season. These measures were then compared to federal statistics on violent crime for the same areas during the following year. The results were "quite surprising," according to Messner: "SMSAs in which large audiences are attracted to violent television programming tend to exhibit low rates of violent crime" (p. 224). Among the several analyses Messner did with the data was to examine just the population segment of males in the crime-prone years of 18 to 34; the

findings were the same as for the general population. When Messner concludes by saying, "The data consistently indicate that high levels of exposure to violent television content are accompanied by relatively low rates of violent crime" (p. 228), he is opening the door to an interpretation of the relationship of television violence and real-world aggression which controverts the presently prevailing one.

If one stops to reflect on one's own television viewing (violent content or not), such reflection can lead to the conclusion that, in personal terms, television does not rile a person up but rather accomplishes the opposite, nudging one towards slumber. This would have to be the personal conclusion of most individuals, since audience figures disclose that viewing is highest in the evening, that it is the activity of choice for Americans in the hours between the work day and sleep. And indeed, when polled viewers will confess readily that their prime reason for watching television is to rest and relax (LoSciuto, 1972, p. 75). Moreover, of all possible activities television is held to be the most relaxing (Csikszentmihalyi & Kubey, 1981).

It would be highly unlikely for the violent content, a sizable component of the total offering, to violate viewers' covenant with the medium. Much more likely would be that the fantasy violence accomplished exactly what

most of the other programming does--the reduction of resentments and tensions and other impediments to a sense of tranquillity. The mechanism for this release is easy to hypothesize: the viewer would identify with the running back or the policewoman or the secret agent and, as the television figure aggresses in a sanctioned manner, the viewer vicariously aggresses in parallel fashion, and privately and harmlessly discharges hostile impulses (Fowles, 1992, Chap. 7). If this happened with enough individuals, it would explain Messner's surprising finding.

There would have to be several unremarkable conditions met for this animus-reducing service to work. The viewer must have certain levels of stress and resentment awaiting relief, or the violent content will be unnecessary, and may be met with resistance. The viewer must understand that the video display is one of fantasy, not reality; if it is taken as real, it will have an opposite effect, and elicit fear or a matching aggression. The viewer must select the kind of violent programming which the viewer is at ease with; another person's selections may not suffice at all. (We can imagine a wife who says she is disgusted by the seneseless battering on her husband's football game, and changes the channel to a showing of the movie _Thelma and Louise_, whereupon it is the husband's turn to become uncomfortable.) There is an essential voluntariness to successful violence viewing, a condition that is defied in every laboratory experiment on the topic. Once these conditions are obliged, then the viewing of fantasy violence will help in the release of antagonisms and in the management of emotions. This

phenomenon, made mysterious and disreputable by scholars, transpires every night in millions upon millions of households.

An early and interesting finding about the experience of violence viewing was that, whatever the objective count of violent occurences in a program, people tended to judge their most favorite action/adventure shows as relatively free of violence, and their less favorite as overly violent (Howitt & Cumberbatch, 1974). A show will not be perceived as too violent once a viewer has established a close relationship with it, one that in all likelihood brings that viewer desired benefits. Favored violent content is favored, and is seen as not offensively violent, because it permits its viewer to enter easily into its territory, and to aggress by proxy. On the other hand, violent content which is difficult to enter, which resists a viewer's identification, is judged critically. It is the other show, one that for one reason or another the viewer cannot imaginatively enter, one that is perhaps a favorite of other people, that is labeled violent. As always, the problem lies with the "other."

The main obstruction prohibiting a productive understanding of violence viewing is that individuals often feel that their own experiences with such viewing (experiences that are usually minimized whenever pondered) are not representative of other people's experiences. Thus: my experience is rare, slight, and relaxing; their experience is constant, intense, and likely to enrage. They are conceived of as inferior, as young, dark, violent, mindless-- everything the critic is not. At bottom, there is a conception of the other here which is demeaning as well as false. In John Hartley's words, "The monster

who watches television and then goes on a rampage is a <u>metaphor</u>, a creation of criticism" (1988, p. 236).

But once we accept the position that the other person's experience with televised fantasy violence is going to be more like one's own experience than unlike it, then the true nature of voluntary violence viewing can be appreciated.

Why then do many seemingly knowledgeable people insist that television fantasy violence stimulates real-world aggression when, first, it is not at all clear from the scientific literature that this is the case (Fowles, 1984), and second, an analysis of their own viewing would suggest otherwise? And why would these same people become irritated, if not irate and aggressive, when the counter-argument is broached? The answer lies in the age-old and tireless cultural conflict of high culture versus popular culture, the elite versus the common, the patrician versus the plebian, the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat, the dominant versus the dominated. The detractors of television violence are all firmly ensconced in the dominant strata of American society; they are the legislators, the professors, the lawyers, the doctors, the privileged guardians of things as they are. Their adherence to the dominant culture situates them in opposition to popular

culture, and to the excesses, exuberance, and intemperance characteristic of popular culture. This opposition comes in many guises, a prominant one being the attack on televised fantasy violence. Membership in the dominant culture is often hard-won, and is certainly treasured, for it lends a person social locus and self-identity. Cultural identity--the particular set of meanings that one takes to oneself, and finds in those like oneself (but not in the other) --is so precious and so fundamental that if a leading article of faith within that cultural identity is called into question, it can provoke reactive and aggressive feelings. Thus when notions about television violence which circulate widely within the dominant culture are challenged, the response of members of that cultural community can be strongly defensive, even hostile. The emotional response indicates that what is being defended is not some abstract concept, but a key cultural orientation. In this case, the emotionality of the response can be deftly camouflaged as a pro-social, anti-violence advocacy, and so there is usually little cause to contain it, and some cause to display it.

That the dominant culture would select television fantasy violence as a site for its attack upon the culture of the majority is not difficult to explain. The backdrop is the widespread perception of escalating crime rates and social violence. It should be noted that rising crime figures are confirmed in one national index (the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports) but not in the other (the Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Surveys), leaving unresolved the question of whether crime is on the increase or not. The fact that more people are being imprisoned could be the exercise, once again, of

the dominant culture against the dominated, rather than the result of more criminal behavior. In any case, the mere <u>perception</u> of increased social violence instigates a search for explanations and remedies. Explanations that immediately present themselves--the high unemployment rates for inner city youths, the ready availability of hand guns, the defined criminality of drug usage--appear highly resistant to remediation. Television violence, on the other hand, is little defended, and so a target of opportunity.

It is curious that television fantasy viole ce is so prevalent yet has so little outright support. Violent content is a major part of the television industry's product, but the vocal defense from that industry of fantasy violence is only sporadic and mild. The viewing public, the devoted consumers of televised violence, does not appear to contest the invective of critics and detractors. Perhaps any counterattack from the viewership has been compromised by the massiveness of the privileged culture's condemnation of television violence. And perhaps the viewership is guided by its past experience with these cultural wars, in that the violent content is never actually expunged, but eluding its chastizers simply shifts around, as from weekly series to made-for-TV movies. The very massiveness of the critical attack is telling about the ultimate resilience and endurance of the content.

In order to rationalize the attack upon this largely undefended (and, the argument here is, not just harmless but actually beneficial) target, anti-violence advocates must execute a mental contortion which children learn as

early as possible not to execute: they must confuse fantasy with reality. That is, they have to look at television fantasy violence and judge it to be realistic, capable of real instruction that is transferable to the real world. They profess to be afraid that the mass audience (that collection of others) will confuse fantasy with reality, whereas in truth it is they themselves who are effecting the confusion. The result of this contortion is that the anti-violence forces would deny to the public the symbolic, hostility-reducing, therapeutic content which the public demonstrably appreciates, and, if there is any truth to the Messner study, would stimulate the antisocial behaviors which the critics profess to deplore.

A conceptualization to be faulted is the elite's concept of television's "mass audience"--a concept frequently employed and always accepted, but which, under interrogation, begins rapidly to wilt, and to reveal its crime of misportraying the viewership. Raymond Williams, writing over thirty years ago, tried gamely to unmask the concept of the mass audience, and to expose it for the canard that it is; it is worth rehearing his wise words:

> I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours,
> colleagues, acquaintances, as masses: we none of us
> can or do. The masses are always the others, whom we
> don't know, and can't know. Masses are other people
>
> There are in fact no masses; there are only ways
> of seeing people as masses. We ourselves are all the
> time being massed by other. To the degree that we find

the formula inadequate for ourselves, we can wish to extend to others the courtesy of acknowledging the unknown (1958, pp. 299-300).

If one wishes to ignore the tentativeness of the scientific literature on the subject of violence viewing, if one refuses to admit that violent content has the similar drowsy influence upon other viewers that it has upon oneself, and if one sees no merit in recasting the anti-violence crusade as a cultural sortie, and one still presses for limitations on television fantasy violence, then it must be recalled that such limitations cannot be implemented without repercussions. The Attorney General may feel that there are no Constitutional obstacles to the censoring of television violence, but the courts are unlikely to agree, since such censoring would contravene the First Amendment, which affirms clearly, "Congress shall make no law abridging ... the freedom of speech, or of the press." In truth, over two hundred years Congress has made several laws limiting these freedoms, and the courts have sustained them, but they were regarding matters where no other redress was possible. You are not allowed to publish national secrets during wartime, for example, nor are you allowed to transmit child pornography. The legal system has decided to favor the Sixth Amendment, which

guarantees a fair trail, above the First, whose exercise could prejudice a fair trial. But aside from these and a few other incontrovertible matters, the First Amendment has remained largely intact. To permit it to be suspended so that television violence can be curtailed--when reasonable doubts exists about the need and motivation for doing so--is a questionable and perhaps dangerous maneuver. If this content is to be proscribed, then what content might be next? And what after that? Would we reach a point where, for instance, multicultural themes could not be aired, or feminist concerns raised? An unappealing vista presents itself.

Note

1. Not all scholars find that Eron proves what he says he proves. He has been criticized for not making his longitudinal data available for scrutiny by others. Sohn (1982) says that Eron's reluctance to reveal his data suggests the longitudinal correlations do not exist.

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