

MARKETING GLOBAL MAYHEM

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Introduction

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with images of violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive invasion of colourful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever larger areas of the world.

Of course, there was blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare. Violence is a legitimate and even necessary feature of cultural expression, balancing deadly conflicts and compulsions against tragic costs. But the historically limited, individually crafted and, selectively, used symbolic mayhem has been swamped by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly-line.

The violence and terror we see on television bear little or no relationship to their actual occurrence. Neither their frequency nor their nature resembles trends in crime statistics. Rather, they follow marketing formulas that call for injecting "action" into dramatic programs and news. Our recent study found that crime and violence news doubled while actual violence declined, precluding the possibility of balanced reporting.

Our long-standing research project called Cultural Indicators¹ has found that children are born into a cultural environment of five violent acts per prime-time hour, four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs, and two to three entertaining murders a night. Contrary to the hype that promoted them, most actual uses of cable, video, cassettes, and other new technologies make the dominant patterns penetrate even more deeply (but not more cheaply) into everyday life.

Our analysis has found that exposure to violence-laden media cultivates an exaggerated sense of insecurity and mistrust, and anxiety about the mean world seen on television. Furthermore, the sense of vulnerability and dependence imposes its heaviest burdens on women and minorities.

Media violence demonstrates power and paves the way for repression. It is an integral part of an increasingly centralised,

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conglomerated and globalised media production and distribution system that has drifted out of democratic reach. That system creates the cultural environment in which we all live, with television its mainstream.

A child today is born into a home in which television is on an average of more than seven hours a day. For the first time in human history, most of the stories about people, life and values are told not by parents, schools, churches, or others in the community who have something to tell, but by a group of distant conglomerates that have something to sell.

This is a radical change in the way we employ creative talent and the way we cast the cultural environment. The roles we grow into and the ways others see us are no longer home-made, hand-crafted, community-inspired. They are products of a complex manufacturing and marketing process. Television is the mainstream of the process. Our Cultural Indicators research project has built a cumulative database describing many thousands of characters, programs, and items that map key features of the new cultural environment.

Fewer sources fill more outlets more of the time with ever more standardised fare designed for global markets. Global marketing streamlines production, homogenises content, sweeps alternative perspectives from the mainstream, and moves cultural policy beyond democratic, or even national, reach. There is no historical precedent, constitutional provision, or legislative blueprint to confront the challenge of the new consolidated controls that really count — global conglomerate controls over the design, production, promotion and distribution of media content and the power relationships embedded in it.

The casting and fate of characters in television drama set the stage for violence and other power-plays to follow. Women play one out of three roles in prime time television, one out of four in children's programs, and one out of five of those who make news. They fall short of majority even in daytime serials. They age faster than men, and as they age, they are more likely to be portrayed evil and to be victimised.

People of colour, the vast majority of humankind, are less than 11 per cent of prime-time and 3 per cent of children's program casts. When Americans, they are mostly middle-class, making the race issue virtually invisible. Latino/Hispanics, over **nine per cent of the US population**, are about one per cent of prime time and half of that of children's program casts. A child viewer sees the fewest minorities.

In the overwhelmingly middle-class consumer world of television, poor people play a negligible role. The low-income 13 per cent of the US (and much larger percentage of minorities) is reduced to 1.3 per cent or less on television. A disproportionate number of ill-fated characters come from the ranks of poor, Latino and foreign men, and African-American and poor women.

Programs designed specifically for children's favourite viewing time, Saturday morning, present a world that is even harsher than prime time. The inequities of prime time are magnified Saturday morning. A child will see about 123 characters each Saturday morning, but rarely, if ever, a mature female as leader. Married and parent images are curiously rare and gloomy in children's programs. Mid-life and older women in Saturday morning children's programs are the least visible but most evil and, consequently most highly victimised group; this is where the witches are.

