

A LINE ON LIFE

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News Media and the Mean World *

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In a 1994 study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, psychologist George Gerbner has found that news about crime has tripled in the first half of the 1990s. More recent research indicates this pace is continuing. Local TV news reports of crime have doubled in the past two years. Does that necessarily mean that crime is rampant in our culture?



In reality, since 1973, crime rates on a per-population basis across all categories have fallen. The only exception is rape. (Even with rape, the increase seems to be related to more people reporting the crime, rather than an actual increase in the crime itself.) What is happening?

According to Gerbner's surveys, people usually indicate that they don't like violent programs. Even so, both violent fictional programming and news reporting have increased. The main focus seems to be *marketing*. The charge for an advertisement depends on how many people are watching at any given time. Dramatic action is easy to make and distribute to foreign markets. According to Gerbner, "Action speaks in any language." With the changes in the last 15 years, many viewers have grown up with a steady diet of TV violence.

"Increased fear and insecurity are characteristic of those who consume a heavy dose of TV crime reports."

However, this negatively affects viewers, especially those who watch a great deal of television. With the flood of crime news and other violent reality-based programming, viewers develop what Gerbner calls the "*mean-world syndrome*." People who often watch this violence believe that the world is a more dangerous place than it really is. With the mean-world syndrome, heavy viewers change their views about violence.

- In the long term, they begin to see violence as the solution to almost any problem.
- They become accustomed to violence. They are numbed to the brutality.
- They develop a sense of fear and danger. "*There's a mistrust of strangers who look or act differently.*"

In a 1994 study, sociologist William Chambliss found that – for the first time in history – local governments were spending more on crime than education. Chambliss went back about 70 years in analyzing Gallup polls. Previously, respondents had labeled the most serious problem in the country as the economy or joblessness. For brief periods, war would be the main topic of concern. Crime would be picked as the top concern by only 2-4% of the people. Even with urban rioting in the 1960s, only 21% thought

crime was our major national problem. Currently – even with reduced crime rates – the "crime-and-drugs" category is picked as the main problem by 45-50% of respondents.

The change seemed to originate with politicians, who wanted to make crime a dominant issue for their own purposes. In the sixties, Barry Goldwater (1964) and Richard Nixon (1968) tried unsuccessfully to run on a "law and order" ticket. However, this campaign rallying cry became more successful with Reagan, Bush and Clinton. Many of us can remember the ad – referring to "revolving doors" in the prison parole system – that George Bush used to indicate Michael Dukakis was soft on crime.

The increased success of a "law and order" platform coincides with the increased TV coverage of crime in the news. For example, between 1990-1994, the evening news coverage of murder stories increased nine-fold. News stories related to the trial of O. J. Simpson alone outnumbered coverage of midterm elections or health-care reform.

In local TV news in Philadelphia, there seems to be a quota for crime stories. According to Gerbner, "*One in three or four [news segments] is a crime item, and 80% is not even local.*" Often local TV news broadcasts will only run segments on interpersonal violence, if they have visual coverage of the violence. News broadcasters say, "*If it bleeds, it leads.*"

All of this contributes to a **pluralistic ignorance** among the politicians, the press and the public. In each segment, there are many people who believe that our main problems are *not* crime and violence. However, each believes others think that way, so they fail to express their views. Without expressing our contrary views, we remain ignorant of similar sentiments of others.

With the aid of the media news, elected officials foster the mean-world syndrome. According to Gerbner –

"You have increased demagoguery, more jails, more capital punishment. For all practical purposes, if you grow up in a heavy viewing home, you 'live' in a meaner world and act like it...."

In contrast, others who live in the same neighborhood may watch much less television. They are likely to perceive the world as less dangerous.

Even worse, our children get a steady diet of televised violence. According to a 1991 study by psychologist George Comstock of Syracuse University, the typical 7-year-old watches TV 17 hours a week. Eleven-year-old children average 28 hours of viewing. They are prime audiences for this diet of violence and the subsequent mean-world syndrome.

According to Comstock, no other country has a mean-world syndrome. In addition, no other country has a television system completely controlled by a marketing strategy that relies on violence.

* Adapted from Nathan Seppa's article, "News shows exaggerate prevalence of violence," [*APA Monitor*](#), April, 1996, page 9.