

has responded, what laws exist that address the addiction, what economic consequences it has, how it can be “cured,” and so on. Then compare the list you’ve compiled to the facts about television addiction that Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi discuss in the reading. Based on this comparison, do you think that excessive television viewing can genuinely be considered an “addiction”? Why or why not?

Writing Suggestion

For this assignment you’ll need access to the Internet in order to research “TV Turn-Off Week.” This annual event, described briefly by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi, is organized by Adbusters. At <http://adbusters.org/campaigns/tvturnoff/> you can read more about this event, including personal accounts of people who participated and information about how the television media reported the event. You can also take a look at posters that people designed to publicize “TV Turn-Off Week,” view a 30-second TV “uncommercial” produced for the event, and read related articles. After reading through all of this information, write an essay in which you argue either for or against the merits of “TV Turn-Off Week.” Be sure to use quotations and/or statistics from the article by Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi in your argument. Feel free to include anecdotes or observations from your own experiences as a TV viewer to help bolster your position.

Life According to TV

Harry Waters

The world of television directly influences how people see the “real” world around them. So says George Gerbner, a noted cultural critic and communications scholar. Gerbner and his staff spent over fifteen years studying the televised programs America watches. Their results paint a damning picture of the TV industry. In the following essay, Harry Waters summarizes Gerbner’s research about how the televised world matches up to “reality” and to people’s perception of reality. To that end, Gerbner breaks the television-viewing audience into a number of different representative categories—gender, age, race, and lifestyle, just to name a few—and he observes how people in each category are portrayed in different television shows.

Frequently, Gerbner’s results, as detailed by Waters, are surprising. For example, contrary to most studies of the relationship between TV and crime, which suggest that television causes people to become more violent, Gerbner argues that the prevalence of crime on TV creates a “fear of victimization” in the viewer. This fear ultimately leads to a “mean-world syndrome” in which

viewers come to see their social surroundings as hostile and threatening. Waters balances Gerbner’s conclusions with comments from network officials who, not surprisingly, often take Gerbner to task.

As you read this selection, pay particular attention to the way Waters maintains his objectivity by attributing most of the opinions and conclusions to Gerbner and his assistants. Notice, too, how Waters’s opinions about Gerbner’s research can be detected in phrasing such as “the gospel of Gerbner,” “tidy explanation,” and “comforting.”

Since this is an article originally published in Newsweek, a magazine which claims to report the news without bias, you might ask just how really objective so-called objective reporting is.

The late Paddy Chayefsky, who created Howard Beale, would have loved George Gerbner. In “Network,” Chayefsky marshaled a scathing, fictional assault on the values and methods of the people who control the world’s most potent communications instrument. In real life, Gerbner, perhaps the nation’s foremost authority on the social impact of television, is quietly using the disciplines of behavioral research to construct an equally devastating indictment of the medium’s images and messages. More than any spokesman for a pressure group, Gerbner has become the man that television watches. From his cramped, book-lined office at the University of Pennsylvania springs a steady flow of studies that are raising executive blood pressures at the networks’ sleek Manhattan command posts.

George Gerbner’s work is uniquely important because it transports the scientific examination of television far beyond familiar children-and-violence arguments. Rather than simply studying the link between violence on the tube and crime in the streets, Gerbner is exploring wider and deeper terrain. He has turned his lens on TV’s hidden victims—women, the elderly, blacks, blue-collar workers and other groups—to document the ways in which video-entertainment portrayals subliminally condition how we perceive ourselves and how we view those around us. Gerbner’s subjects are not merely the impressionable young; they include all the rest of us. And it is his ominous conclusion that heavy watchers of the prime-time mirror are receiving a grossly distorted picture of the real world that they tend to accept more readily than reality itself.

The 63-year-old Gerbner, who is dean of Penn’s Annenberg School of Communications, employs a methodology that meshes scholarly observation with mundane legwork. Over the past 15 years, he and a tireless trio of assistants (Larry Gross, Nancy Signorielli and Michael Morgan) videotaped and exhaustively analyzed 1,600 prime-time

programs involving more than 15,000 characters. They then drew up multiple-choice questionnaires that offered correct answers about the world at large along with answers that reflected what Gerbner perceived to be the misrepresentations and biases of the world according to TV. Finally, these questions were posed to large samples of citizens from all socioeconomic strata. In every survey, the Annenberg team discovered that heavy viewers of television (those watching more than four hours a day), who account for more than 30 percent of the population, almost invariably chose the TV-influenced answers, while light viewers (less than two hours a day), selected the answers corresponding more closely to actual life. Some of the dimensions of television's reality warp:

SEX

Male prime-time characters outnumber females by 3 to 1 and, with a few star-turn exceptions, women are portrayed as weak, passive satellites to powerful, effective men. TV's male population also plays a vast variety of roles, while females generally get typecast as either lovers or mothers. Less than 20 percent of TV's married women with children work outside the home—as compared with more than 50 percent in real life. The tube's distorted depictions of women, concludes Gerbner, reinforce stereotypical attitudes and increase sexism. In one Annenberg survey, heavy viewers were far more likely than light ones to agree with the proposition: "Women should take care of running their homes and leave running the country to men."

AGE

People over 65, too, are grossly underrepresented on television. Correspondingly, heavy-viewing Annenberg respondents believe that the elderly are a vanishing breed, that they make up a smaller proportion of the population today than they did 20 years ago. In fact, they form the nation's most rapidly expanding age group. Heavy viewers also believe that old people are less healthy today than they were two decades ago, when quite the opposite is true. As with women, the portrayals of old people transmit negative impressions. In general, they are cast as silly, stubborn, sexually inactive and eccentric. "They're often shown as feeble grandparents bearing cookies," says Gerbner. "You never see the power that real old people often have. The best and possibly only time to learn about growing old with decency and

4

5

grace is in youth. And young people are the most susceptible to TV's messages."

RACE

The problem with the medium's treatment of blacks is more one of image than of visibility. Though a tiny percentage of black characters come across as "unrealistically romanticized," reports Gerbner, the overwhelming majority of them are employed in subservient, supporting roles—such as the white hero's comic sidekick. "When a black child looks at prime time," he says, "most of the people he sees doing interesting and important things are white." That imbalance, he goes on, tends to teach young blacks to accept minority status as naturally inevitable and even deserved. To assess the impact of such portrayals on the general audience, the Annenberg survey forms included questions like "Should white people have the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods?" and "Should there be laws against marriages between blacks and whites?" The more that viewers watched, the more they answered "yes" to each question.

6

WORK

Heavy viewers greatly overestimated the proportion of Americans employed as physicians, lawyers, athletes and entertainers, all of whom inhabit prime-time in hordes. A mere 6 to 10 percent of television characters hold blue-collar or service jobs vs. about 60 percent in the real work force. Gerbner sees two dangers in TV's skewed division of labor. On the one hand, the tube so overrepresents and glamorizes the elite occupations that it sets up unrealistic expectations among those who must deal with them in actuality. At the same time, TV largely neglects portraying the occupations that most youngsters will have to enter. "You almost never see the farmer, the factory worker or the small businessman," he notes. "Thus not only do lawyers and other professionals find they cannot measure up to the image TV projects of them, but children's occupational aspirations are channeled in unrealistic directions." The Gerbner team feels this emphasis on high-powered jobs poses problems for adolescent girls, who are also presented with views of women as homebodies. The two conflicting views, Gerbner says, add to the frustration over choices they have to make as adults.

7

HEALTH

Although video characters exist almost entirely on junk food and quaff alcohol 15 times more often than water, they manage to remain slim, healthy and beautiful. Frequent TV watchers, the Annenberg investigators found, eat more, drink more, exercise less and possess an almost mystical faith in the curative powers of medical science. Concludes Gerbner: "Television may well be the single most pervasive source of health information. And its over-idealized images of medical people, coupled with its complacency about unhealthy life-styles, leaves both patients and doctors vulnerable to disappointment, frustration and even litigation."

CRIME

On the small screen, crime rages about 10 times more often than in real life. But while other researchers concentrate on the propensity of TV mayhem to incite aggression, the Annenberg team has studied the hidden side of its imprint: fear of victimization. On television, 55 percent of prime-time characters are involved in violent confrontations once a week; in reality, the figure is less than 1 percent. In all demographic groups in every class of neighborhood, heavy viewers overestimated the statistical chance of violence in their own lives and harbored an exaggerated mistrust of strangers—creating what Gerbner calls "mean-world syndrome." Forty-six percent of heavy viewers who live in cities rated their fear of crime "very serious" as opposed to 26 percent for light viewers. Such paranoia is especially acute among TV entertainment's most common victims: women, the elderly, nonwhites, foreigners and lower-class citizens.

Video violence, proposes Gerbner, is primarily responsible for imparting lessons in social power: it demonstrates who can do what to whom and get away with it. "Television is saying that those at the bottom of the power scale cannot get away with the same things that a white, middle-class American male can," he says. "It potentially conditions people to think of themselves as victims."

At a quick glance, Gerbner's findings seem to contain a cause-and-effect, chicken-or-the-egg question. Does television make heavy viewers view the world the way they do or do heavy viewers come from the poorer, less experienced segment of the populace that regards the world that way to begin with? In other words, does the tube create or simply confirm the unenlightened attitudes of its most loyal audiences? Gerbner, however, was savvy enough to construct a methodology

8

9

10

11

largely immune to such criticism. His samples of heavy viewers cut across all ages, incomes, education levels and ethnic backgrounds—and every category displayed the same tube-induced misconceptions of the world outside.

Needless to say, the networks accept all this as enthusiastically as they would a list of news-coverage complaints from the Ayatollah Khomeini. Even so, their responses tend to be tinged with a singular respect for Gerbner's personal and professional credentials. The man is no ivory-tower recluse. During World War II, the Budapest-born Gerbner parachuted into the mountains of Yugoslavia to join the partisans fighting the Germans. After the war, he hunted down and personally arrested scores of high Nazi officials. Nor is Gerbner some videophobic vigilante. A Ph.D. in communications, he readily acknowledges TV's beneficial effects, noting that it has abolished parochialism, reduced isolation and loneliness and provided the poorest members of society with cheap, plug-in exposure to experiences they otherwise would not have. Funding for his research is supported by such prestigious bodies as the National Institute of Mental Health, the Surgeon General's office, and the American Medical Association, and he is called to testify before congressional committees nearly as often as David Stockman.

12

MASS ENTERTAINMENT

When challenging Gerbner, network officials focus less on his findings and methods than on what they regard as his own misconceptions of their industry's function. "He's looking at television from the perspective of a social scientist rather than considering what is mass entertainment," says Alfred Schneider, vice president of standards and practices at ABC. "We strive to balance TV's social effects with what will capture an audience's interests. If you showed strong men being victimized as much as women or the elderly, what would comprise the dramatic conflict? If you did a show truly representative of society's total reality, and nobody watched because it wasn't interesting, what have you achieved?"

13

CBS senior vice president Gene Mater also believes that Gerbner is implicitly asking for the theoretically impossible. "TV is unique in its problems," says Mater. "Everyone wants a piece of the action. Everyone feels that their racial or ethnic group is underrepresented or should be portrayed as they would like the world to perceive them. No popular entertainment form, including this one, can or should be an accurate reflection of society."

14

On that point, at least, Gerbner is first to agree; he hardly expects television entertainment to serve as a mirror image of absolute truth.

15

But what fascinates him about this communications medium is its marked difference from all others. In other media, customers carefully choose what they want to hear or read: a movie, a magazine, a best seller. In television, notes Gerbner, viewers rarely tune in for a particular program. Instead, most just habitually turn on the set—and watch by the clock rather than for a specific show. “Television viewing fulfills the criteria of a ritual,” he says. “It is the only medium that can bring to people things they otherwise would not select.” With such unique power, believes Gerbner, comes unique responsibility: “No other medium reaches into every home or has a comparable, cradle-to-grave influence over what a society learns about itself.”

MATCH

In Gerbner's view, virtually all of TV's distortions of reality can be attributed to its obsession with demographics. The viewers that primetime sponsors most want to reach are white, middle-class, female and between 18 and 49—in short, the audience that purchases most of the consumer products advertised on the tube. Accordingly, notes Gerbner, the demographic portrait of TV's fictional characters largely matches that of its prime commercial targets and largely ignores everyone else. “Television,” he concludes, “reproduces a world for its own best customers.”

Among TV's more candid executives, that theory draws considerable support. Yet by pointing a finger at the power of demographics, Gerbner appears to contradict one of his major findings. If female viewers are so dear to the hearts of sponsors, why are female characters cast in such unflattering light? “In a basically male-oriented power structure,” replies Gerbner, “you can't alienate the male viewer. But you can get away with offending women because most women are pretty well brainwashed to accept it.” The Annenberg dean has an equally tidy explanation for another curious fact. Since the corporate world provides network television with all of its financial support, one would expect businessmen on TV to be portrayed primarily as good guys. Quite the contrary. As any fan of “Dallas,” “Dynasty” or “Falcon Crest” well knows, the image of the company man is usually that of a mendacious, dirty-dealing rascal. Why would TV snap at the hand that feeds it? “Credibility is the way to ratings,” proposes Gerbner. “This country has a populist tradition of bias against anything big, including big business. So to retain credibility, TV entertainment shows businessmen in relatively derogatory ways.”

In the medium's Hollywood-based creative community, the gospel of Gerbner finds some passionate adherents. Rarely have TV's

best and brightest talents viewed their industry with so much frustration and anger. The most sweeping indictment emanates from David Rintels, a two-time Emmy-winning writer and former president of the Writers Guild of America, West. “Gerbner is absolutely correct and it is the people who run the networks who are to blame,” says Rintels. “The networks get bombarded with thoughtful, reality-oriented scripts. They simply won't do them. They slam the door on them. They believe that the only way to get ratings is to feed viewers what conforms to their biases or what has limited resemblance to reality. From 8 to 11 o'clock each night, television is one long lie.”

Innovative thinkers such as Norman Lear, whose work has been practically driven off the tube, don't fault the networks so much as the climate in which they operate. Says Lear: “All of this country's institutions have become totally fixated on short-term bottom-line thinking. Everyone grabs for what might succeed today and the hell with tomorrow. Television just catches more of the heat because it's more visible.” Perhaps the most perceptive assessment of Gerbner's conclusions is offered by one who has worked both sides of the industry street. Deanne Barkley, a former NBC vice president who now helps run an independent production house, reports that the negative depictions of women on TV have made it “nerve-racking” to function as a woman within TV. “No one takes responsibility for the social impact of their shows,” says Barkley. “But then how do you decide where it all begins? Do the networks give viewers what they want? Or are the networks conditioning them to think that way?”

Gerbner himself has no simple answer to that conundrum. Neither a McLuhanesque shaman nor a Naderesque crusader, he hesitates to suggest solutions until pressed. Then out pops a pair of provocative notions. Commercial television will never democratize its treatments of daily life, he believes, until it finds a way to broaden its financial base. Coincidentally, Federal Communications Commission chairman Mark Fowler seems to have arrived at much the same conclusion. In exchange for lifting such government restrictions on TV as the fairness doctrine and the equal-time rule, Fowler would impose a modest levy on station owners called a spectrum-use fee. Funds from the fees would be set aside to finance programs aimed at specialized tastes rather than the mass appetite. Gerbner enthusiastically endorses that proposal: “Let the ratings system dominate most of prime time but not every hour of every day. Let some programs carry advisories that warn: ‘This is not for all of you. This is for nonwhites, or for religious people or for the aged and the handicapped. Turn it off unless you'd like to eavesdrop.’ That would be a very refreshing thing.”

16

17

18

19

20

ROLE

In addition, Gerbner would like to see viewers given an active role in steering the overall direction of television instead of being obliged to passively accept whatever the networks offer. In Britain, he points out, political candidates debate the problems of TV as routinely as the issue of crime. In this country, proposes Gerbner, "every political campaign should put television on the public agenda. Candidates talk about schools, they talk about jobs, they talk about social welfare. They're going to have to start discussing this all-pervasive force."

There are no outright villains in this docudrama. Even Gerbner recognizes that network potentates don't set out to proselytize a point of view; they are simply businessmen selling a mass-market product. At the same time, their 90 million nightly customers deserve to know the side effects of the ingredients. By the time the typical American child reaches the age of reason, calculates Gerbner, he or she will have absorbed more than 30,000 electronic "stories." These stories, he suggests, have replaced the socializing role of the preindustrial church: they create a "cultural mythology" that establishes the norms of approved behavior and belief. And all Gerbner's research indicates that this new mythological world, with its warped picture of a sizable portion of society, may soon become the one most of us think we live in.

Who else is telling us that? Howard Beale and his eloquent alarms have faded into off network reruns. At the very least, it is comforting to know that a real-life Beale is very much with us . . . and really watching.

Examining the Text

1. Waters reports extensive studies by George Gerbner and his associates that show that heavy television viewers have a generally "warped" view of reality, influenced by television's own "reality warp" (paragraph 3). Which viewers do you think would be affected most negatively by these "warped" viewpoints, and why?
2. Gerbner's studies show that "55 percent of prime-time characters are involved in violent confrontations once a week; in reality, the figure is less than 1 percent" (9). While violent crime is known to rank as middle-class America's primary concern, most violent crime occurs in neighborhoods far removed from most middle-class people. How do you explain these discrepancies? Why is "violent confrontation" so common on television? How does the violence you see on television affect you?
3. Waters interviewed a number of different people when he wrote this article for *Newsweek*. Collectively, they offer a variety of explanations for

21

22

23

and solutions to the limited images television provides. Look closely at these suggested causes and solutions. Which seem most reasonable to you? In general, is Waters's coverage of the issue balanced? Why or why not?

4. *Thinking rhetorically*: Following up on the "as you read" question in the introduction to this article, what is your impression of the objectivity of this article? Where in the article do you see indications that the author is striving to be objective? Where do you see the author's opinions and biases coming through? In general, what is the relationship between objectivity and persuasiveness? That is, do you think it's easier or more difficult to be persuasive when you're also compelled to be objective?

For Group Discussion

This article was first published more than ten years ago. With your group, look again at Gerbner's categories and discuss what significant recent examples suggest about the way current television programming represents reality. Do today's shows seem more accurate than those of ten years ago? As a class, discuss whether or not most viewers want more "reality" on television.

Writing Suggestion

The TV guide is a fine example of nonacademic but very common reading material in our culture. Millions of people read TV schedules every day and think nothing of it. This writing assignment asks you to reflect on *how* you read TV schedules and to interpret what meanings can be found in these common documents.

On page 168 is a reproduction of a page from the TV listings in our local (Santa Barbara, CA) newspaper, listing the televised offerings on Thursday, December 8, 2005. Begin writing about this document by describing it: What are its distinguishing features? How is the information organized? How does its appearance differ from the pages of this textbook? Next, take notes describing the strategies you use in reading this document: Where do you begin? Where does your eye go next? What factors influence your choices? Are there parts of the document that you ignore completely? Why? Finally, write down your thoughts about the content of this schedule: To what extent do the TV programs scheduled for this evening confirm or contradict Waters's claims in "Life According to TV"? As you bring these observations together in an essay, highlight what you see as the two or three most important features of TV schedules in general, based on your observations of this specific example.