

THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME: Media Violence & the Cultivation of Fear

[TRANSCRIPT]

MICHAEL MORGAN: Ever since Hollywood added sound to the movies in the late 1920s, debate has raged about the impact of violent media on our minds and our behavior - from alarm about violence in the movies in the 1930s to concerns about the acceleration of violent content across virtually the entire media landscape today. Hundreds of studies and countless Congressional hearings have looked at the issue of media violence and have always seemed to end up at the same place -

POLITICIAN: *Does anyone disagree with that conclusion that violence in films propagates violent conduct on behalf of the children?*

MORGAN: A debate about whether those exposed to media violence are prone to imitate it, and whether media is to blame for society's ills. But for all the endless debate, a basic question remains: Is the issue really about whether we imitate what we see? And if that's the case, why do the vast majority of us watch TV and never commit a violent act?

This film looks at the work of a man who took a more complicated look at the issue of media violence. The late communication scholar George Gerbner spent the better part of four decades trying to understand media violence as part of the larger complex of stories we tell ourselves as a culture, stories that reveal and shape how we see the world and our place in it. And what he found was as remarkable as it was simple: not that consuming media violence is likely to make us violent, or to commit acts of violence, but something else entirely: that it's likely to make us more scared of violence being done to us.

GEORGE GERBNER: *As a citizen, I would consider a matter of very grave concern because a society in which most people or many people already expect a higher degree of victimization sooner or later they are going to get it.*

MORGAN: George Gerbner's exposure to violence came early and on an epic scale - first when, as a young man, he fled to the United States from his native Hungary to escape fascism. Then, a short time later, when he enlisted in the U.S. Army to fight in World War II - going on to earn the Bronze Star for bravery as a member of the Office of Strategic Services for parachuting into enemy territory under heavy fire in one of the war's bloodiest battles.

With his war experience behind him, Gerbner would spend the rest of his life trying to understand violence - specifically how the portrayal of violence through images and stories affected our consciousness and behavior in the real world. He rose to

prominence as one of the world's foremost media scholars, serving as dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania for 25 years and directing one of the most important and influential research efforts ever undertaken to understand the effects of television. He called it the Cultural Indicators Research Project.

Since it began in the late 1960s, the Cultural Indicators Project has systematically tracked media violence and measured its impact on the perceptions and attitudes of viewers. And what Gerbner and his colleagues found was that exposure to media violence seemed to have more complicated effects than simply causing people to act violently - effects rooted not only in the quantity of violence in media, but also in its quality, in how it was portrayed, in the stories these simulations of violence tell about our relationships to the world and others.

I'm Michael Morgan, professor of communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and for over 25 years I worked with George Gerbner doing research on the effects of media. Gerbner, who died in 2005, sat with us for an extensive set of interviews toward the end of his life to discuss his ideas about media violence and how it functions in society. This film is based on those interviews. And it begins where Gerbner always began: the fact that commercial media have eclipsed religion, art, oral traditions and the family as the great storytelling engine of our time.

A TIDAL WAVE OF VIOLENCE

GERBNER: Today a handful of global conglomerates own and control the telling of all the stories in the world. They have global marketing formulas that are imposed on the creative people in Hollywood. And I'm in touch with them and they hate it, they say "don't talk to me about censorship from Washington, I never heard about that. I get censorship everyday. I'm told 'put in more action! Cut out complicated solutions!'" "Apply this formula because it travels well on the global market." These are formulas that need no translation, essentially image-driven, that speak action in any language and of course the leading element of that formula is violence.

This is a historically unprecedented tidal wave of images of violence inundating every home often with expertly choreographed brutality such as the world has never seen.

This is an expansion, a mass production, and the introduction into every home, a relentless, pervasive exposure to violence and brutality many times a day.

MORGAN: The numbers are staggering. Children now see about 8,000 murders by the end of elementary school, and about 200,000 violent acts by the age of 18.

From movies to television shows to video games to children’s programs to 24-hour news channels, aggression is now routine, everyday, formulaic, a staple industrial ingredient. And in fact, for Gerbner it is the routine nature of this violence that makes it so dangerous and so different from the past.

GERBNER: Now this is not the same as traditional storytelling. First, there was violence in Shakespeare. There was violence in fairytales. And then, in effect, if you think about it, violence is a legitimate, artistic, and journalistic feature. It is even necessary to show the tragedy and the pain and the damage that these obsessions with violent solutions to human conflict can create in lives and in communities and in societies. But most of the violence that we see is what I call “happy violence.”

TV CLIP:

Narrator: *Dr. Armond Dorien will analyze the injuries the warriors and their weapons will inflict.*

Dorien: *This guy’s going to be watching his own guts spill out.*

GERBNER: It has to be highly entertaining violence. That means that they’re thrilling, that they’re swift, that they’re often glamorous, that they’re certainly spectacular, and they always lead to a happy ending.

FILM CLIP: *Rush Hour 3*

(singing) Everybody was kung fu fighting. That man was fast as...

GERBNER: Sugarcoated with humor to be sure.

FILM CLIP: *Pulp Fiction*

- I mean do you think that god came down from heaven and stopped...

- What’s happening?

- Oh man, I shot Marvin in the face.

GERBNER: But humor makes the pill easier to swallow. Humor is an excellent communication device because the pill is the pill of power: who can get away with what against whom.

MORGAN: So from Gerbner’s perspective, what matters most about media violence – whether it’s meant to be humorous or silly or not – is not simply the quantity of violence that now saturates the media landscape, but how it all adds up to tell a story – a story that reinforces and normalizes a certain view of the world. In this way, it is not simply the violent acts on their own, but the meaning of all this violence that has the greatest effect on those who are most immersed in it. And it’s here, on this point, that Gerbner breaks with an entire tradition.

“IT’S LIKE THE FISH IN THE WATER...”

POLITICIAN: *This is a document signed by six of the major public health organizations saying that the violence in the entertainment, the level that we’ve attained to today, is causing increased aggressive behavior amongst some children.*

GERBNER: The typical notion of effects of television, and indeed most of the media questions and discussions about the effects of television can be exemplified by the notion that when people ask about violence they say does it create more violence?

CNN: *There’s something else that the experts we talk to say about this increase in teen violence and crime. They say it may be caused by the messages that are being sent to the teens.*

GERBNER: The effect is supposed to be an imitation, a kind of monkey-see-monkey-do effect.

CBS: *In Indianapolis Monday, a 4-year-old told police he shot his sister in the head because he saw someone do it on the TV.*

GERBNER: When you see violence, you’re going to conduct violence; you’re going to commit violence.

POLITICIAN: *Does anyone disagree with that conclusion that violence in films propagates violent conduct on behalf of the children?*

GERBNER: This is really trivial. The contribution of television violence into the actual committing of violence is practically negligible. Nobody has been able to demonstrate that it is a significant contributor compared to poverty, compared to subcultures in which violence is very frequent, compared to many other factors that really are the root causes of violence.

MORGAN: The oversimplified view that media violence causes violent behavior has its roots in the earliest media research, which grew out of fears about the sensational and violent content of Hollywood’s first talking motion pictures, and what this violence was doing to the minds of kids who were now flocking to movie houses.

The best known of these research efforts, the Payne Fund Studies of 1929-1932, seemed to find that crime and violence in films had a powerful, direct, and lasting effect on children, sowing the seeds for future nervous disorders. And even though this research raised interesting questions in the infancy of media research, it missed the bigger picture by focusing on the immediate and short-term emotional reactions of audiences exposed to particular instances of violence.

And perhaps the most influential example of this view, that mass media messages have a direct and immediate effect on audiences, would come just a few years later.

RADIO HOST: *The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in The War of the Worlds by H.G. Wells.*

VOICE OF ORSON WELLES: *We know now that in the early years of the 20th century this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man.*

MORGAN: On October 30, 1938, Halloween eve, Orson Welles presented the H.G. Wells science-fiction classic War of the Worlds to a national audience, and proceeded to scare the wits out of a good many of his listeners with this Victorian tale of alien invasion.

VOICE OF ORSON WELLES: *Peering out of that black hole through luminous discs, the eyes – it might be a face – might be something out of the shadow like a grey snake. Now it's another one, then another one, and another one.*

MORGAN: It was compelling fiction, but it sounded like an actual news report, and there were reports of widespread panic that aliens had actually invaded the planet. The controversy reinforced fears that had been building for years about the power of mass media to exercise a direct and immediate effect on audiences and audience behavior.

ORSON WELLES: *I was extremely surprised to learn that a story that had become familiar to children, through the medium of comic strips and many succeeding novels and adventure stories, should have had such an immediate and profound effect upon radio listeners.*

GERBNER: It didn't matter that this apparently immediate and profound effect would turn out to be nowhere near as dramatic as originally reported, or that the sensationalized press reports deflected attention away from the fact that the vast majority of people who heard the Welles broadcast knew it was fiction, and didn't panic at all.

The idea that media content seemed capable of exerting some kind of direct and immediate mass mind control over a passive public had taken hold in the popular imagination. In this view, which media researchers called the magic bullet theory, the assumption is that media messages act on us directly like shots from a gun –leaving our minds changed in their wake. A view of media violence as all-powerful and viewers as essentially passive that continues to shape debates about media violence to this day.

But for Gerbner, these cause-and-effect arguments were simply wrong when it came to making sense of media influence, more science fiction than science. They were old

approaches based on the outdated notion that people are passive and mass media works on them like some great mind control device – like a stimulus applied to lab animals – controlling what we think from the outside. This way of doing things may have made things easier for social scientists, allowing them to measure effect by examining and comparing our minds before and after we're exposed to media messages and campaigns. But in Gerbner's view, the very idea of a before and after didn't make much sense in the media context – for the simple reason, as he used to say, that with media there is no before: we are born into a mediated environment. The question is: how to measure the effects of a force that is present from the start? A sea of images, as media scholar Marshall McLuhan liked to say, that has become so familiar to us that we're often as blind to its all-encompassing presence as a fish is to water.

MARSHALL MCLUHAN: *It's like the fish in the water. We don't know who discovered water, but we know it wasn't the fish. A pervasive medium, a pervasive environment, is always beyond perception.*

MORGAN: We have become so accustomed to our cultural environment it's like a fish that doesn't know that it is swimming in water because it has never experienced anything else. This leads us to the notion of cultivation. Cultivation is a stable system of messages and images that shape our conception of the world and of ourselves, and of life itself, and society, and power.

Now the question is: how do you measure cultivation? This is a research problem that we faced and we resolved it in the following way. We give surveys to large groups of representative respondents. These surveys have a series of questions not about television, not about media, but these are questions about life, questions about security, questions about values, questions about attitude.

For example, we ask them: what are your chances of encountering violence in an average weeknight? Is it 1 in 100 or 1 in 50? We asked, "Would you be reluctant to go down the street in your own neighborhood at night? Yes or no?" And then we separate the responses into heavy and light viewers and we find that in almost every instance, the heavy viewers exhibit a greater sense of insecurity. And we attribute that to the great frequency of violence encountered on television.

The response pattern of heavy viewers tends to converge into what we call the television mainstream. So that with heavy viewers, the usual differences among different social groups – differences of age or gender, of income or education -- begin to erode. The heavy viewers, for all practical purposes, live in a meaner world.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Cultivation studies show that heavy viewers of television are more likely than light viewers to perceive the world as a frightening and scary place.

GERBNER: They integrate and absorb a sense of danger, of mistrust, of meanness in the world – is what we call the Mean World Syndrome.

THE MEAN WORLD SYNDROME

WOMAN ON THE NEWS: *You always have to look over your shoulder. A lot of times you might feel uneasy if somebody's walking by you. You feel like you're always on guard.*

MORGAN: To get a handle on what Gerbner means by the Mean World Syndrome, it's not enough to analyze individual TV programs or films or video games. The entire media context is what matters – how one kind of story or program blends into another to create and reinforce a distinct view and sense of the world. Getting to the heart of the Mean World Syndrome, then, requires taking a look at TV the way most of us experience it – at home – when we're not in classrooms thinking about these things: by simply picking up the remote and doing a little channel surfing. When we do, with every change of the channel we're likely to see the most banal content, alternating with the most bizarre and violent & frightening. So that what would be shocking in our real lives, in the media world comes to seem normal and mundane – reinforcing the sense that the world is a place of constant danger and threat.

A world of psychotic killers.

HLN: *Can you imagine smashing a person's teeth out and cutting off their fingers?*

MORGAN: Child abductors.

FOX: *Prosecutors say he raped children and tried to infect them with the AIDS virus.*

MORGAN: Murder and mayhem.

TV NARRATOR: *The mayhem spreads to the back office.*

MORGAN: Disease and plague.

FOX: *A highly contagious string of bird flu.*

CNN: *Swine flu deaths in the United States are rising.*

FOX: *It's a toxic chemical used in rocket fuel, and it's showing up in milk and drinking water.*

MORGAN: Threats of war.

DICK CHENEY: *Defiance will invite the severest consequences.*

MORGAN: And visions of the end times.

JOHN HAGEE: *Satan is no myth. He is a monster, who will rob, kill, and destroy you and you and you without mercy.*

MORGAN: The wrath of God, the wrath of nature.

CNN: *From the air, we just got word that five people are trapped in a canyon.*

CNN: *This kind of smoke looks apocalyptic.*

MORGAN: Where people are animals.

MAN ON THE NEWS: *Ryan Jenkins is an animal.*

MORGAN: And animals attack. Even in the safety of our own homes.

SPIKE TV HOST: *No matter how tame our pets may seem, they never completely lose their basic animal instincts like hunting and fighting. And that's never more obvious than when two animals square off against each other. The results can be terrifying. Because waiting on the other side was a ravenous 10-foot long boa constrictor. The snake coils around the defenseless dog and begins to suffocate her.*

OLD WOMAN: *That snake took away my best friend.*

MORGAN: The overall effect – sometimes humorous, sometimes less so – is of a mean world in which predators of every stripe – and every species – seem forever on the loose.

CNN: *Across the state, thousands of pythons are on the loose.*

A serial killer and a serial gunman are on the loose, and until their caught nobody is safe.

MORGAN: With the news media in particular presenting a nightly carnival of the most terrifying stories.

CNN: *Police believe this is the very moment she was abducted. She told of the four days she was chained, raped, and tortured in her Virginia townhouse.*

FOX: *A New Jersey woman has been charged with murdering her brother-in-law after she spiked his fruit punch with anti-freeze.*

LOCAL NEWS: *Six people accused of organizing fights in a school for the mentally disabled.*

LOCAL NEWS: *He is accused of shooting a man in the head at a four-year-old's birthday party over the weekend.*

MORGAN: And this sensationalism is especially true with local news, which is the primary news source for 2/3 of Americans – with 61% of all lead stories on the local news dedicated to crime, fires, disasters, and accidents. And with so intense and constant a focus on these kinds of stories across the broadcast airwaves, it stands to reason that the more TV you watch, the more you might develop a sense of the world as a scary and dangerous place.

WOMAN ON THE NEWS: *I have to do what I can to protect myself and my children. And that's a fact of life, a way of life.*

MORGAN: What cultivation analysis has done is to show how these kinds of anxieties and insecurities are caught up explicitly with media culture – uncovering a direct correlation between the amount of television one watches and the level of fear one has of being victimized.

GERBNER: If you look at it from a cultivation point of view, you see that the image of victimization, the image of risk, the image of danger, the conception that if there is so much violence in the world, I'm at risk. Not that I'm going to go down the street to be a mugger but on the contrary. I'm afraid to go down the street at night, I'm afraid to go into the subway, I'm afraid of strangers, I try to cross the street when I see somebody that I think may be dangerous to me. These are the consequences of exposure to violence that are cultivated in large communities over long periods of time.

MORGAN: The finding that if you watch a lot of TV you're likely to be more afraid of violence than those who watch less TV, may help explain why so many people seem to think violent crime is far worse than it actually is - a widespread misperception that started to be noticed a decade ago when crime rates began to drop.

ABC (1994): *Here is the reality. Violent crime per capita actually dropped slightly in the latest figures released by the Justice Department. Nationwide, murder was down five percent. But the perception continues to dominate reality, triggering a fear that is out of sync with statistics – a fear that no one and no place is safe anymore. And when you're always on guard, it's hard to let go of fear – no matter what the reality.*

MORGAN: And this classic example of the Mean World Syndrome continues today. In fact, since that ABC news report about falling crime rates, Justice Department figures show that violent crime has dropped an additional 43% to a remarkable 30-year low.

CNN: *The FBI says violent crime dropped 2.5% in 2008. Now that includes an overall 4.4% decline in murders.*

MORGAN: But despite this steady drop, polls have consistently shown that most Americans believe just the opposite to be true – that crime has actually been increasing.

CNN: *Three-quarters of Americans say there is more crime in the United States than there was a year ago. Gallop's annual crime poll shows it's the highest level since the early 1990s. The poll also finds 51% of Americans say there is more crime in their local area than there was a year ago.*

MORGAN: When we see reports like this, is it any wonder that Americans seem more intent than ever on protecting themselves?

CNN:

Jack Cafferty: *Speaking of hitting home, check this out. I'm a firearms instructor in Nassau County, Florida. Last weekend, we had 18 people go through our courses to get concealed weapons carry licenses. The number of people getting these licenses is astounding. Everyone expresses a fear of being attacked. When I go to Jacksonville's concert hall downtown, I go heavily armed because one of the neighborhoods west of there is the fourth deadliest in America. Imagine listening to Mozart, carrying a 357 magnum.*

Wolf Blitzer: *Tough, tough stuff. Indeed. Scary stuff. All right, Jack. Thank you.*

CBS: *Business is booming at gun shops across the country.*

CNN: *One man ran into a Walmart and said, sell me all the ammo you have.*

NBC: *Pistols, shotguns, even ammunition, are flying off the shelves.*

MORGAN: There may be no better illustration of what Gerbner means by the Mean World Syndrome than the fact that gun sales have risen sharply during exactly the same period that crime has dropped sharply – the majority of this spike occurring over just the past three years alone, despite record declines in violent crime across the board. Crime may be down, but for some reason fear does not seem to be.

MAN ON THE NEWS: *I've always been pro-gun control. And suddenly I'm going: I don't know, maybe I should own a gun.*

60 MINUTES: *We could fall into chaos. Well, chaos is a good reason to be able to protect yourself.*

MAN ON THE NEWS: *You have people who are depressed, people that might be upset. You know, carrying around a gun, you feel comfortable. You feel like you have a little bit of power.*

MAN ON THE NEWS: *You're protecting yourself from Americans going crazy, rioting, looting, and hurting each other.*

MAN ON THE NEWS: *I've been through Y2K, and I've been through 9/11. I have never seen people so afraid.*

MORGAN: The logical question is why? Why do fear and anxiety about violence seem to be rising even when the threat of violence is falling? Well, surveys consistently show that upwards of two-thirds of the people who believe crime to be a very serious personal problem say they get most of their news from television. This is the breakthrough of cultivation analysis: a clear correlation between the amount of media we consume and the degree of fear and anxiety we have about the world – a phenomenon that comes into especially clear focus when we look at how we view and treat others, especially those who are different from us.

MEAN PEOPLE

MORGAN: One of Gerbner's most important contributions was to reveal the human costs of the Mean World Syndrome. And he did this by looking carefully at how different groups are portrayed – and not portrayed – in television and movies.

GERBNER: Most of us live rather insulated lives and we don't meet too many people of other groups, of other races, other ethnic backgrounds than our own. Most of what we know about other races, other ethnic groups, we know from television. And on television we get some very peculiar type of information.

MORGAN: For example, while Latinos are the fastest growing demographic group in the United States, currently representing about 15% of the nation's population, they make up only about 6% of all characters in television and movie drama. And when they are represented, it's overwhelmingly as characters in a world of violence.

GERBNER: The Hispanic Americans are probably the most violent group on American television.

MORGAN: Latinos are usually portrayed as doing harm to others – or as deserving of white violence and justice. And beyond the world of fiction, in the so-called real world, they don't fare any better.

AMERICA'S MOST WANTED: *The war on our border with Mexico is very real. This is the kind of violence that border patrol agents face every day as they try to protect our country from illegal activity.*

MORGAN: With little in the world of TV and film drama to balance the image, Latinos are mentioned over and over again in popular news and talk programs, when they're mentioned at all, in the context of a single issue.

LOU DOBBS: *It's very simple. Illegal immigration... Between 12 and 20 million illegal immigrants in this country. Illegal immigrant... All illegal immigrants. Millions of illegal immigrants in the country. Including many murderers and rapists.*

TEXT ON SCREEN: While Latinos are mentioned in just 2% of cable news programs overall, programs such as CNN's *Lou Dobbs Tonight* have been found to focus on illegal immigration in upwards of 70% of their episodes. (Pew Research Center, 2009 & Media Matters, 2007)

LOU DOBBS: *Police open fire on three vans packed with illegal immigrants trying to ram their way across the border.*

MORGAN: The point here isn't that illegal immigration isn't a problem – it's that the media gives nowhere near as much attention to the vast majority of regular, decent, law-abiding Latino citizens. And as we might expect – and this is the key to all of this – these one-sided representations seem to have had a de-humanizing effect.

TEXT ON SCREEN: A poll conducted by the National Opinion Research Center found that 73% of Americans believe that "more immigrants cause higher crime rates." (Social Science Research Council, 2007)

MORGAN: How else to explain that upwards of three-quarters of Americans say they feel that more immigration leads to higher crime rates? Even though, according to the FBI, the opposite seems to be the case: With crime at historic lows over the past ten years in major cities and border cities like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Miami, San Diego and El Paso where the immigrant population is actually at all-time highs. But such facts are apparently not allowed to get in the way of the more menacing perceptions cultivated in media's mean world.

FOX: *We can't stop all murders, rapes, and deadly drunk driving accidents, but our officials should be doing everything possible to prevent those committed by people who have no right to be here.*

MORGAN: Gerbner's bottom-line point was that without positive representations to balance the bad, the meanest members of minority groups are allowed to stand in for all the rest – creating a distorted and menacing picture that leaves viewers feeling under attack, and reinforcing a siege mentality that feeds – and feeds off of – anger and rage.

FOX:

Bill O'Reilly: *He doesn't have a right to be in this country.*

Geraldo Rivera: *But that has nothing to do with the fact that he was a drunk.*

Bill O'Reilly: *It does. He should have been deported. And this mayor and this police chief didn't deport him.*

MORGAN: The mean world creates mean people, cultivating irrational fear – and anger – among those whose primary knowledge of Latinos, regardless of whether they're citizens or legal or illegal immigrants, seems to come from media.

MINUTEMAN ANTI-IMMIGRATION PROTEST:

Minutewoman: *This really isn't funny. This is our country and our sovereignty. This has nothing to do with you now. It has something to do with losing our country. And we don't want to do that. And you people are destroying it.*

Minuteman: *Where you from dude?*

Mexican-American Man: *I'm from Jalisco, Mexico.*

Minuteman: *Then go back to Mexico, you coward.*

Mexican-American Man: *I'm the coward? How am I a coward? I'm here by myself. I'm surrounded by minutemen and I'm the coward?*

Minutewoman: *What would happen if we went into your group?*

Minuteman: *You're the coward. You come here to mooch off of this country. Why don't you go fix your own country? You got no balls, huh?*

Minuteman: *You're just a stinking son of a bitch.*

Minutewoman: *You should be ashamed of yourself.*

MORGAN: But it doesn't stop there. The same pattern of vilification and violent backlash also plays out with perhaps our most popular cast of villains, Arabs and Muslims.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Over the last century, approximately 90% of Hollywood portrayals of Arabs have been negative. (*Reel Bad Arabs*, Olive Branch Press)

MORGAN: Presented disproportionately as blood-thirsty terrorists, and faring little better in the arena of TV news and politics –

POLITICIAN: *I fear that in the next century we will have many more Muslims in the United States if we do not adopt strict immigration policies.*

MORGAN: Where Muslims and Arabs are repeatedly linked with violence and terror.

ABC: *Calling for Muslims to attack the embassies of the U.S. and its allies.*

NBC: *The FBI's investigating several Muslim men and possible terrorist training in the Washington, D.C. area.*

NBC: *The call goes out for all Muslims to attack America and Jews.*

MORGAN: Setting in motion a cycle of fear and recrimination that bleeds from our news into our fictional forms and back again – as violent representations of Arabs and Muslims in TV shows and movies repeatedly trigger an even more violent reaction.

Including the increased popularity of torture as part of our evening entertainment – a violent reaction and backlash that seems to have played out in the real world as well.

TEXT ON SCREEN: 48% of Americans believe torturing suspected terrorists is often or sometimes justified.

39% of Americans believe Muslims living in the US are not loyal to America.

More than 1/3 of Americans believe Muslims living in the US are sympathetic to Al Qaeda.

Nearly 1/4 of Americans say they would “not like to have a Muslim as a neighbor.” (USA Today/Gallup Poll, 2006)

FOX:

- *Born in America. Bred here in America. Muslim extremist terrorist.*
- *Spreading vicious anti-American and violent extremism.*
- *Except for Timothy McVeigh, every terrorist has been a Muslim.*
- *There's a theology that feeds terrorism. Now I don't claim to understand the Quran. I'm not an expert at all. All I know is what I'm told.*

ROD PARSLEY: *Allah was a demon spirit. Even Muhammad thought so.*

FOX: *Extremist Muslim terrorism. The terrorist Muslim extremism. The Muslim extremist terrorist. End of story.*

TEXT ON SCREEN: As attention to TV news increases, from low to heavy viewing, the number of people supporting restrictions on Muslim Americans increases nearly 50%. (Cornell University, Media & Society Research Group)

MORGAN: The point here, once again, is that this kind of fear and hard-line condemnation of entire groups of people seems to be based less on our actual relationship with those people than on our relationship with media – a relationship that becomes even more complicated with African-Americans.

GERBNER: With African-Americans, the situation is somewhat different. This has been a group that has achieved some recognition on television, in terms of being anchor people, in terms of a certain visibility on television. Actually African-Americans are about 14% of the television population, which is close to the real population. But their representation is very peculiar.

BLACK MAN ON TV SHOW: *This bacteria is unique. It allows itself to be ingested by healthy immune system cells called fagesites.*

GERBNER: Peculiarly, they are healthier, they're wealthier, they're more successful, they're more middle class than characters in general, giving the impression that there's no problem, their problems have been solved, that they're very successful.

TV COMMERCIAL: *(singing) Come fly with me. Let's fly, let's fly away.*

GERBNER: Leading to the notion that the African-American civil rights and equality movement has achieved its goal and there's no problem.

MSNBC: *It will be different than it was before. A five-year-old will grow into an America that says an African-American can be president. Because guess what? He is.*

GERBNER: It's as if to say, "You see that there's no problem anymore. There's no race problem." The switch comes when African Americans are portrayed in the news.

LOCAL NEWS:

- *Late this afternoon, two men were sent to prison for raping a woman.*
- *He has a long record of violent arrests. That may not surprise you.*
- *The 22-year-old fired more than a dozen shots while trying to get away from authorities.*
- *Police track down the guy they think did it.*
- *Saunders was one of four men arrested for a random attack on a young couple.*
- *The animal just went through surgery after deputies say a suspect stabbed him in the mouth.*

TEXT ON SCREEN: Blacks are twice as likely as whites to be shown as perpetrators of crime on local news. (Journal of Communication)

GERBNER: An African-American male is twice as likely to be seen in connection with crime, with drugs, with violence, than is the fact in life.

CNN: *They say this guy roughed up two elderly women. There's one of them that we showed you yesterday.*

MORGAN: Gerbner's point was that this bifurcated image of black males, in particular, presents two extremes that conceal the reality of the vast majority of working class and poor black people's lives, and that this in turn has a negative effect on the way a lot of white people look at black crime.

TEXT ON SCREEN: Heavy viewers of local news are more likely to perceive black people in general as violent. (Journal of Communication, 2008)

In reality, white people are 4.7 times more likely to be victimized by another white person than by a black person. (US Department of Justice, 2004)

MORGAN: With the vast middle of the African American experience erased from the airwaves, the result is that black criminals become the face of urban issues like poverty and inequality, in the process creating an often unspoken climate of fear and anger and resentment that makes it virtually impossible to solve our inner-city problems, including crime, by any other means than policing and punishment. If, on the one hand, there's this glowing image of African Americans that can make it seem to some that we've overcome issues of inequality, then when blacks do step out of line, it's almost as if they're ungrateful, and therefore deserving the harshest punishment.

So whether we're talking about Blacks and Latinos being depicted as violent criminals, or Arabs and Muslims as extremists and terrorists, what troubled Gerbner the most was how such an irrationally fearful view of others, and the world, could make people, in his words, "more dependent, more easily manipulated and controlled, more susceptible to deceptively simple, strong, tough measures and hard-line postures, making them more likely to accept and even welcome repression if it promises to relieve their insecurities."

THE FALLOUT

POLITICIAN: *We have to protect our people from killers who prey on our society. The only thing we can do is take these people off the streets and put them in cages where they belong.*

GERBNER: The political fallout is that if you raise the level of insecurity in people, in a large population, they are more likely to demand protection. Candidates compete with one another as to who can advocate the harsher sentences.

CBS: *Democrats and Republicans will have to be careful not to get into a bidding war about who is tougher on crime. Why not two strikes and you're out, or one?*

GERBNER: If you have a large population that is insecure and is expecting some kind of assurance or reassurance or some kind of protection, they are more likely to accept political solutions to the problems of society – like poverty, and urban decay, and the urban culture of violence – not to remedy the root causes, but simply solutions that represent more repression. More police.

POLICE OFFICERS:

- *Let me see your hands now. On the ground, on the ground.*
- *Get down.*

GERBNER: More jails.

NBC: *A shocking new number was released today, and it deserves our undivided attention. One out of every one hundred Americans is now behind bars – locked up in prison or in jail.*

GERBNER: Longer and harsher sentences, more executions, a medieval barbarism that no other civilized country even contemplates anymore.

CBS:

- *It's not as far-fetched as you may think. Given time and technology, scientists say, space-based human warehouses could be the prisons of the future. Just one of dozens of concepts now being discussed by a handful of penology experts in America who are charting the future. Ideas for the next millennium call for everything from underwater prison pods to actually freezing prisoners for the length of their sentences in order to hold down on cost. And surgically implanted electrodes could even shock them until they return to where they're supposed to be.*
- *Messages being piped into the subconscious constantly: Do the right thing. Do what's required of you. Be a good citizen. Don't disobey the law.*
- *And if you think space prisons are a stretch, listen to this one.*
- *Say we have a 20-year-old who just committed a violent crime. Why don't we age him 25 years, make him 45, put him back on the streets, and not have to worry about this.*

GERBNER: But it's not just that we imprison more people; we imprison ourselves. We are all paralyzed, fleeing to our suburbs.

PROMOTIONAL VIDEO: *Welcome to My Community at Hot Springs Village. We have the freedom and the space to do the things we enjoy. We're also a secure community. Access to Hot Springs Village is controlled by 24-hour manned and electronic securities.*

GERBNER: The Mean World Syndrome contributes to a sense not only of vengeance and repression, but to a sense of panic.

TV COMMERCIAL:

- Hello?
- This is Chris from Brinks Home Security. Are you all right?
- No. Someone just tried to break in. The alarm scared them off.
- Are you home alone?
- Yeah. My parents just left.

GERBNER: This is another element of the Mean World Syndrome – a kind of insecurity that makes it very difficult to address our problems except in ways of fear.

TV COMMERCIAL:

- How bad is it?
- Traffic's off the chart.
- They're picking more targets.
- Isolate. Prevent damage.
- Got 'em.

MORGAN: Beyond the home, in a kind of seamless blending of how fear can bridge the personal and the political, Gerbner argued that the flipside of personal insecurity is the heightened demand for national security.

POLITICAL ADVERTISEMENT: *In an increasingly dangerous world, even after the first terrorist attack on America, the liberals in Congress voted to slash America's intelligence operations. And weakness attracts those who are waiting to do America harm.*

MORGAN: Fear is now a staple of American politics. And whether it's been used to justify going to war –

DICK CHENEY: *There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has...*

DONALD RUMSFELD: *...weapons of mass destruction.*

ARI FLEISCHER: *Botulinum, VX, sarin, nerve agent.*

BILL FRIST: *Terrorism.*

RUMSFELD: *Cyber attacks.*

FLEISCHER: *Nuclear program.*

COLIN POWELL: *Biological weapons.*

MORGAN: Or to prepare for constantly new and emerging threats.

BARACK OBAMA: *This is the epicenter of violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda. This is no idle danger, no hypothetical threat.*

MORGAN: The question with all of this, as we look at the fear-charged political landscape, is whether these images of a mean world spiraling out of control – threatening to do us harm at every turn – have contributed to a sense of anxiety and fear that is overwhelming our ability to think clearly, and rationally, beyond a reasonable concern for security and the need to defend ourselves.

What mattered most to Gerbner was that the violent imagery that fills up everyday mainstream television and film and news and reality programming is likely to create in most regular viewers a sense of fear and mistrust, with implications that reach far beyond media entertainment – into the very depths of how we perceive the world and our place in it.

From Hollywood movies and primetime drama, to children’s programs and video games, straight through to reality programs and the very heart of our news culture, what concerned Gerbner most about media violence wasn’t so much its sheer quantity – or its brutality – not so much whether media violence caused violence in the real world – but how it all works in the aggregate to form a culture in itself – a culture of meanness that has normalized and held in place a distorted sense of the world as an irrational and dangerous place, hardening us, making us less compassionate even as it makes us feel more vulnerable ourselves. And spending time living in that world of television breeds in regular and heavy viewers a sense of anxiety, fear, and anger totally out of proportion with reality.

In the end, George Gerbner’s work forces us to confront the meaning of this mediated, constructed world, and to ask why have we allowed so much cultural power and influence to fall into the hands of so narrow a range of commercial interests?

GERBNER: Indeed, the telling of stories, the cultivation of a sense of who we are, what the world is like, has always been the principal shaper of human behavior. The new task, then, is to try to design a media system – a cultural environmental system – which will address the issue of how can we create an environment for our children, of stories, of all the socializing influences in which they grow up that is more fair, that is more equitable, that is more just, and less damaging than the one we have today.

[END]