

**INTRODUCTORY NOTE:** Brian Stonehill directs the media studies program at Pomona College. He published the essay from which the following passage is adapted in 1993.

### **"Channel the Appetite for Gore"**

It is clear that our culture has a substance-abuse problem where violence is concerned; we all know that the addiction to portrayals of violence on our screens is harmful to society, but we don't know how to begin to give it up. The current round of public discussion was started two years ago, when former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, writing in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, addressed violence as a public-health issue. By now, the metaphor of violence as a toxin or pollutant in our culture is starting to sink in.

It also needs to be more widely recognized that violence is so abundant in our culture not because that culture merely reflects a violent society at large; nor are our screens so bloody because someone in Hollywood hopes to influence society into becoming even more violent. No, violence on the tube is structural: the sole economic function of commercial television is to deliver eyeballs to advertisers. And that's what violence does.

As Aristotle explained nearly 23 centuries ago, the quickest way to grab an audience's attention is through antithesis -- the dramatic juxtaposition of opposites. Assailant and victim, cops and robbers, antagonists in wars -- such frictions create instant interest. On TV, time costs money. It takes practically no time at all for a fired bullet, a slashing knife, a crashing car to deliver its eye-grabbing impact. Compare that in your mind with how long it takes to "set up" an act of kindness. On the freeway, people will slow down to take a look at an accident. Yet if you ask them what's important to them in life, they will not answer "road kill." But as long as the economic mission of the mass media is to deliver the largest possible audience to the sponsor, it will always be in TV's interest to feed us a daily diet of road kill to keep our eyes glued to the tube.

The problem, however, is not precisely with violence per se. What has gone wrong is the relative value of life that our media convey. The violence that litters *Hamlet's* stage with corpses, for instance, raises the audience's sense of the preciousness and fragility of life. What happens on the local news, or in the latest "crime-time" TV movie, makes us feel that life is cheap and disposable, without consequence. Our culture, rather than turning to censorship or to body-counting parental advisories, needs to learn to treasure programs that treasure life, and to trash the products that treat life as trash.

Fortunately, we stand at a point in the history of technology where something useful can actually be done to remedy the situation. From every side, now, we hear promises and predictions of the "500-channel universe" into which we are apparently about to be plunged. These channels could be organized in such a way as to solve our dilemma with respect to violence, sex, free speech and the need to avoid censorship on the one hand, and the need to restore and preserve the health of our culture on the other.

Let us make a distinction, now, while there's time, between what might be called the virtuous channels and the raw-footage channels. On the virtuous channels, free and available to all, the camera is treated by editors and programmers alike as if it were a child perched on their shoulder -- their own child, in fact. You show that camera everything that you would show your 6-year-old, and you shield it from those things that you would shield your child's eyes from.

The raw-footage channels, accessible only to adults, would carry everything else, including uncensored views of reality and sensational entertainment, not all of which necessarily would be prurient or provocative; some of it would be specialized and detailed in the way that C-Span covers political events.

Our own bodies, after all, house toxins, but they do so (when we're healthy) in organs like the appendix, where those toxins can be safely contained. Culturally speaking, our commercial media are suffering from a burst appendix, with the toxins leaking out everywhere, imperiling the vulnerable among us. But if we prepare intelligently for the coming growth spurt of new media, we can restore the health of our culture and start to revise upward its valuation of life itself. By preserving some clarity among our channels, we can defend both commerce and freedom of expression while protecting a place for innocence, for virtue and yes, even for wisdom.

---

**ESSAY TOPIC:** How significant is the problem that Stonehill discusses? To what degree do you endorse his proposed solution? To develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading--including, of course, "Channel the Appetite for Gore" itself.