# Articles

# TV VIOLENCE
## *Myth and Reality*

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With an average national TV viewing time of 7¼ hours daily, the prevalence of violence in broadcasts is a serious concern. Television programming in the United States is considered the most violent in advanced industrialized nations. Violence is common in TV entertainment–the dramas that portray stories about crime, psychotic murderers, police cases, emergency services, international terrorism, and war. The dramas are played out in highly realistic scenes of violent attacks accompanied by music and other sounds that churn up emotions.

As the realism and gore in the screen images of TV entertainment have intensified, local news cameras have also increasingly focused directly on the bloody violence done to individuals in drive-by shootings, gang attacks, and domestic beatings. Why must these visual details be presented in the news? Why does a typical television evening include so many beatings, shootings, stabbings, and rapes in dramas designed for "entertainment"?

Producers of programming ascertain that scenes of violent action with accompanying fear-striking music can be counted on to hold viewers' attention, keep them awake and watching, and make them less likely to switch channels. The purpose is to gain and maintain a large number of viewers–the factor that appeals to advertisers. The generations of younger adults who have grown up with daily viewing of violence in entertainment are considered to be "hooked." A program has more commercial value if it can hold more viewers, and programmers attempt to ensure high viewer attention with doses of violent action in the program. How does all of this violence affect young people?

## The Results of Research

Several decades ago, a few psychologists hypothesized that viewing violence in the unreal television world would have a cathartic effect and thus reduce the chances of violent behavior in the real world. But other psychologists began to doubt this notion when their research with children revealed that much action on the TV screen is perceived as real by children. Huesmann and Eron (1986), who studied the effects of media violence on 758 youngsters in grades 1 through 3, found that children's behavior was influenced by television, especially if the youngsters were heavy viewers of violent programming. Television violence, according to the researchers, provided a script for the children to act out aggressive behavior in relationships with others. The most aggressive youngsters strongly identified with aggressive characters in the TV story, had aggressive fantasies, and expressed the attitude that violent programs portrayed life as it is. These children were also likely to perform poorly in school and often were unpopular with their peers.

Huesmann and Eron state that television is not the *only* variable involved, but their many years of research have left them with no doubt that heavy exposure to media violence is a highly influential factor in children and later in their adult lives (see also Institute for Social Research 1994 and medical research by Zuckerman and Zuckerman 1985 and by Holroyd 1985).

Research in the field of public communications also supports the conclusion that exposure to television violence contributes to increased rates of aggression and violent behavior. Centerwall (1989, 1993) analyzed crime data in areas of the world with and

without television and, in addition, made comparisons in areas before and after the introduction of TV. His studies determined that homicide rates doubled in ten to fifteen years after TV was introduced for the first time into specified areas of the United States and Canada. Observing that violent television programming exerts its aggressive effects primarily on children, Centerwall noted that the ten- to fifteen-year lag time can be expected before homicide rates increase. Acknowledging that other factors besides TV do have some influence on the quantity of violent crimes, Centerwall's careful statistical analysis indicated, nevertheless, that when the negative effects of TV were removed, quantitative evidence showed "there would be 10,000 fewer homicides, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults" (1993, 64).

Centerwall (1993) has also brought to light important research literature that has been little known among social scientists and educators concerned about television violence. In the late sixties, as a result of public hearings and a national report implying that exposure to TV increases physical aggression, the large television networks decided to commission their own research projects. NBC appointed a team of four researchers, three of whom were NBC employees, to observe more than two thousand school children up to three years to determine if watching television programs increased their physical aggressiveness. NBC reported no effect. Centerwall points out, however, that every independent researcher who has analyzed the same data finds an increase in levels of physical aggression.

In the study commissioned by the ABC network, a team at Temple University surveyed young male felons who

had been imprisoned for violent crimes. Results of these interviews showed that 22 to 34 percent of the young felons, especially those who were the most violent, said they had consciously imitated crime techniques learned from television programs. It was learned that, as children, felons in the study had watched an average of six hours of TV per day, about twice as much as children in the general population at that time. Research results were published privately by ABC and not released to the general public or to scientists (Centerwall 1993, 65).

CBS commissioned a study to be conducted in London and ultimately published in England (Belson 1978). In the study, 1,565 teenaged boys were studied for behavioral effects of viewing violent television programs, many of which were imported from the United States. The study (Belson 1978) revealed that those who watched above average hours of TV violence before adolescence committed a 49 percent higher rate of serious acts of violence than did boys who had viewed below average quantities of violence. The final report was "very strongly supportive of the hypothesis that high exposure to television violence increases the degree to which boys engage in serious violence" (Belson 1978, 15).

Five types of TV programming were most powerful in triggering violent behavior in the boys in the London study: (1) TV plays or films in which violence is demonstrated in close personal relationships; (2) programs where violence was not necessary to the plot but just added for its own sake; (3) fictional violence of a very realistic kind; (4) violent "Westerns"; and (5) programs that present violence as being for a good cause. In summarizing the implications of the study, the research director made it clear that the results also applied to boys in U.S. cities with the same kind of violence in TV programming (ibid. 528).

For about fifteen years, these studies have received little attention. Each was either filed away or distributed to a very limited audience—not to the general public, the research community, or the press. Today, that seems eerily similar to the fate of tobacco company research on the ill effects of smoking, the results of which were also disseminated only to a small

select group. The Commission on Violence and Youth of the American Psychological Association recently communicated the above-mentioned and other supporting research to its members. It concluded that evidence clearly reveals that viewing and hearing high levels of violence on television, day after day, were correlated with increased acceptance of aggression and more aggressive behavior. The commission noted that the highest level of consumption of television violence is by those most vulnerable to the effects, those who receive no moderating or mediating of what is seen on the screen. (Slaby 1994, Institute for Social Research 1994; see also Holroyd 1985; Zuckerman and Zuckerman 1985).

This information is of great significance to social studies educators. Yet it is only in the last two years that the network-funded studies of the seventies and eighties have been gaining some attention in journals that reach educational professionals. In January 1994, an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* pointed up the huge "education gap" that exists between the effects of television violence that have been conclusively documented by psychological and medical researchers and what the general public knows. According to the article, "Until recently, researchers' voices have been drowned out in the din of denial and disinformation coming from executives of the television and movie industries, whose self-serving defense of violent programming has prevailed" (Slaby 1994).

TV industry spokespersons argue that violent programs are a mere reflection of the society, and that any effort to modify programming would interfere with First Amendment guarantees of freedom of the press. Others claim to be giving the public "what they want" and take no responsibility for the effects on viewers. Another response from the networks is that parents or families must take the responsibility for preventing viewing of violent programs. In none of these defenses are the networks willing to recognize research information that shows that an appetite for violence has been stimulated by the glorification of violence and a daily diet of violent programs broadcast into every home in America.

### History and Social Science Content
The issue of the influence of electronic media on the American life-style is of direct concern to social studies (Hepburn 1990). The curriculum must include study of the influence of the media. Students should be aware of how persistent viewing of violent acts and violent language and music can motivate violent behavior. A number of suggestions for media-related student activities accompany this article.

Although readings about the influence of media are hard to find in school textbooks, at last, magazines, newspapers, public television, and CNN have begun to examine the role of the mass media in the decline of civility and the loss of community. Commercial television networks have been compared with individuals who seek only their own profit, lack respect for others, and feel no sense of public trust. Are these fair conclusions? Social studies can pick up the debate.

Could a media-literate public demand and get better news presentation and more depth in the discussion of alternative social and economic policies? Is there a parallel between the decades in which the public lacked information about the lethal effects of cigarette smoking and the two decades in which the public has been unaware of the effects of heavy doses of television violence on youngsters? Can the reduction of violence in mass media be accomplished by means of increased citizen knowledge and action? Are First Amendment rights of the broadcast industry threatened by public pressures? Will television and radio respond to public discourse and a changed perception of the public market? These are social studies issues of interest to students.

From many passive hours in front of television, what life roles are instilled in viewers, especially more impressionable young viewers? From TV and radio, what values and visions of family life, leadership, friendship, personal relationships, heroism, and public responsibility are absorbed from the images and voices they see and hear? A discussion of role models, of both the norms and realities, can greatly stimulate the awareness and interest of young citizens. This is the stuff of social studies. ∎

# Student Activities to Develop Critical Media Skills

**1. Our Favorite Programs.** Take a poll of students in your class to find out what their favorite weekday prime time (8-11 p.m.) programs are, and also their favorite programs on Saturday and Sunday. Favorite programs can be summarized by type (e.g., movies, cartoons, police dramas) on a poster for a later study of contents. If each student has a notebook for the study of mass media, the results of this poll could be the first entry.

**2. What's on the Air?** Assign each student a different TV channel (include local, regular network, public TV, and pay cable network channels), and ask each to use TV listings in newspapers or magazines to determine how many minutes on a specified day are designated for (1) young children's entertainment, (2) special programs for teenagers, (3) public affairs-information and discussion programs, (4) adult entertainment programs (dramas, sitcoms, quiz shows, science fiction, detective series, love stories), (5) religious programs, and (6) cooking and household repair programs.

**3. What Are the Rules and Obligations?** The airwaves are publicly owned. Licensing and oversight of the use of the airwaves is conducted by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). To obtain guidelines and legal explanation of the responsibilities of all broadcasters to consider community needs and interests in their programming, write or call the FCC, 1919 M Street, NW, Washington, DC 20554; phone 202-418-0200. Reference books and government books in the school library will help clarify the legal framework for radio and television broadcasting.

**4. How Much Violence Is in Our Entertainment?** Discuss the kinds of violent acts and language in television programs and movies to prepare students to monitor "violence" in TV programs. From the list of "favorite programs" (no. 1 above), prepare slips of paper with program titles, so students can randomly draw a program title and plan to monitor the program for violent action, language, or threats. Students should take notes on the name, time, station, and advertisers for each program, and describe the violence discussed or shown in the program. This monitoring activity can be extended to other programs over a weekend or over several evenings. Students can invite their parents to join them in noting how much violence is depicted, suggested, or threatened.

Following a period of collecting data, student groups can share their findings: Which programs contained the most violence? Is violence common in prime time programs and/or at other times? On cable? On regular network channels? On public channels? Which advertisers support programs with heavy violence? Finally, prepare a class summary listing of the most violent and least violent programs.

**5. How Does TV Violence Affect Us?** Discussion: Using notes from program monitoring and recollections or videotape of violent scenes, analyze the images, sounds, and dialogue that hold the viewer's attention. Which are the most frightening, hard to forget, or likely to give people nightmares? Why are some viewers fascinated by scenes of beating, killing, and hurting people? Would these scenes and sounds encourage similar behavior by young viewers? Why or why not?

**6. How Do Music and Sounds Affect Our Emotions?** To further analyze the contents and affects of violent programming, have students return to a selected program that is usually violent and scary. Have them experiment with turning down the sound in dramatic scenes without dialogue. Ask them to observe how pulsating, eerie, pounding music and sounds of howling wind, roaring sic and sounds of howling wind, roaring cars, squealing cats, and other noises can arouse excitement or fear. In turn, they can observe programs where soothing music, laughing children, and cheerful sounds help to make the viewer feel at ease.

**7. Why Would Advertisers Select Programs with Violence?** Discuss with students the fascination that violence and fast action have for some viewer groups, including youngsters, uncritical adults, and less educated individuals. Discuss how people can be mesmerized and fascinated by images of violent conflict, especially if they watch violence daily and begin to see it as a way of life. (References to writings by psychologists and sociologists in the article above will lead you to books and readings about the appeal of violent scenes and the high vulnerability of certain groups of people.) Students can reflect on how advertisers look for programs with large numbers of viewers. In turn, discuss how critical viewers might influence advertisers to select better quality programs for their ads.

**8. TV Consumer Power.** Discuss the power potential of viewers to select quality programs. Students can learn about "market share" and Nielsen ratings from magazines and newspapers. A local TV station or radio station manager can explain how "market share" affects program selection.

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