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Television Violence: An Overview of the Issue and Actions Taken by Congress, the Clinton Administration, and the Television Industry

The Issue

In 1952, Congress first expressed concern about whether viewing violent television programs could cause children and youth to behave aggressively. Rising public interest about the airing of television programs portraying crime, brutality, gratuitous violence,¹ and sexual innuendo led to congressional investigations examining how television might have an influence on juvenile delinquency and affect real-life actions of youth.² As a result of the hearings, the television industry tried to police itself.³

Since 1955, approximately 1,000 research studies, reports, and commentaries about the impact of viewing violent television programs have been published.⁴ Most of these materials concluded that a constant diet of violent behavior depicted on television has an adverse effect on human character and attitudes, encourages violent behavior, and influences moral and social values about violence in daily life. The Mass Media Task Force, working for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1968-69, which studied violence in entertainment programs and its impact on society, particularly children, perceived that television was not the principal cause of violence in society, but was considered a possible contributing factor (still a current view).⁵ Researchers examining the problem for the television

¹Gratuitous refers to violence that is unwarranted and does not contribute to the plot of a program's story line.

²Senate Committee on the Judiciary, *Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency*, Interim Report Pursuant to S.Res. 274, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1965, 2.

³For a more detailed discussion about the history of congressional actions regarding this issue and the outcomes, see: Congressional Research Service, *Television Violence: A Survey of Selected Social Science Research Linking Violent Program Viewing With Aggression in Children and Society*, by Edith Fairman Cooper, CRS Report 95-593, 17 May 1995, 14-17.

⁴Aletha C. Huston et al., *Big World, Small Screen: A Role of Television in American Society* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 53.

⁵For more detailed information about the work of the Media Task Force, as well as a discussion about the social science research efforts examining TV violence, see Congressional Research Service, *Television Violence: A Survey of Selected Social Science Research*, 2-3, and the entire report, respectively.

industry, however, did not find evidence of such a connection. As a result, the major television networks (ABC, CBS, NBC)⁶ maintained that no such relationship existed.

In 1993, however, the position of the major television networks changed probably because of continued pressure from Congress and anti-violence lobbying groups.⁷ For the first time since the issue had been under discussion, executives of the television networks, and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), acknowledged that viewing gratuitous violence could cause adverse effects on viewers. Also, some industry leaders reportedly have conceded that research might be correct and "television could be a factor in the dramatic increase in murders, assaults and illegal weapons sales in this country."⁸ Therefore, although the policy debate continues, it no longer appears to be focused only on the question of whether viewing TV violence can cause subsequent aggressive behavior in viewers. The controversy now includes what can and should the television industry do to decrease the amount of violence in programs and assist parents in keeping such programs away from children?

Violence Portrayed in Television Programs

A Cultural Indicators research project to study trends in television content and how viewers were influenced, was initiated in the 1967-68 broadcast television season by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.⁹ The project, published in the form of "Violence Profiles," was funded through the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)¹⁰ and conducted by George Gerbner, then Dean (now Dean Emeritus) of the Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Gerbner and his colleagues defined violence as "overt physical action that hurts or kills, or threatens to do so." A violent scene was determined to be "continuous violent action among the same characters."¹¹

⁶Until recent years there were three major television networks — ABC, CBS, and NBC. In recent years, the Fox network has increased the number to four.

⁷Megan Rosenfeld, "Warning: TV Violence Is Harmful, Networks Concede," *Washington Post*, 1 July 1993, A1.

⁸Ibid.

⁹The National Commission on Violence was created in 1968 by President Lyndon Johnson who was disturbed by the prevalence of violence in the nation following the assassinations of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. He directed the Commission to investigate the causes of violence in society and find ways for its prevention.

¹⁰Over the years, the project has been sponsored by the President's Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, NIMH, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Screen Actors' Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the Turner Broadcasting System, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention, and the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention of the U.S. Public Health Service.

¹¹"Television Violence Act Has Made An Impact: Penn Study Finds Violence Has Declined (continued...)"

From analyzing the violence content of television programs for 20 years (1973 to 1993),¹² those research scientists found that over the years, the level of violence in prime-time programming remained at about five acts per hour. For the same period, however, Saturday morning cartoon violence levels waxed and waned from a low of 13.2 acts per hour in the 1973-74 broadcast season, to a high of 30.9 violent acts in 1981-82, to a lower percentage of 17.9 acts per hour in 1992-93. They found an average of 23 acts per hour overall for that entire 20-year period.¹³

The Annenberg researchers estimated that the average preschooler and school-aged child watched television two to four hours per day. Depending on how much television is viewed, they determined that by the time an average child finished elementary school, he/she would have seen 8,000 murders, and over 100,000 additional acts of violence on television. Furthermore, by the time a child became a teenager, depending on the amount of television watched, more than 200,000 violent acts could have been viewed.¹⁴

An August 1994 report by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) reported that in one 18-hour day in 1992 (during the 1991-92 television season), observing 10 channels of all major kinds of programs, 1,846 different scenes of violence were noted which translated to more than 10 violent scenes per hour, per channel, all day. A comparison with an 18-hour day in 1994 (during the 1993-94), indicated a 41% increase in violent scenes to 2,605 translating to nearly 15 scenes per hour of violence.¹⁵ These findings indicated much more violence because CMPA researchers used a mixed methodology. Not only did they monitor prime-time programs and children's cartoons, but also included news and "reality" programs, music videos, toy commercials, and promotions for upcoming movies and television series.

A September 1996 update of the study analyzing an 18-hour day in 1995 (during the 1995-96) television season, found that violence was concentrated in cable television movies and cartoons rather than the broadcast television network programs.¹⁶ This study excluded violence in commercials, news, and all non-fiction

¹¹(...continued)

on Major Network Dramatic Shows," *Penn News*, 28 July 1993, 2.

¹²Researchers viewed and analyzed week-long videotaped samples of each television season's dramatic programs.

¹³George Gerbner, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli, *Television Violence Profile No. 16: The Turning Point; From Research to Action*, January 1994. Table 1 — Violence in Television Networks Prime-Time Dramatic Programs, 1973-1993, and Table 2 — Violence in Television Networks Saturday Morning Dramatic Programs, 1973-1993. Provided by Dr. George Gerbner on April 5, 1996.

¹⁴Aletha C. Huston et al., *Big World, Small Screen*, p. 54.

¹⁵Center for Media and Public Affairs, *A Day of TV Violence: 1992 vs 1994*. Prepared by S. Robert Lichter, and Daniel Amundson, 8 August 1994, p. 2.

¹⁶The networks channels studied were Washington, D.C. affiliates of ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox, (continued...)

programming which were included in the previous days observed. Nevertheless, an increase by 74% in the number of violent scenes was recorded, for an average of almost 10 violent incidents per channel.¹⁷ Gun play violence nearly tripled increasing 334% over the three seasons observed, rising from 159 in the 18-hour period in 1992, to 218 in 1994, to 531 in 1995. Furthermore, violence levels were found to be highest on cable channels with 546 scenes on HBO, 322 on the USA channel, and 303 on WDCA. Contrastingly, a total of 60 violent scenes were observed on “the big three” networks — eight on NBC, 21 on ABC, and 31 on CBS. Violence was found mainly in promos for movies and future series episodes. Cartoon violence also was prominent with a total of 147 violent scenes.¹⁸

The CMPA results cannot be generalized across the entire television seasons monitored because the studies covered only one day of a particular season. The organization’s co-director observed from the findings that, “We’re looking for violence in all the wrong places. It’s not on the network prime time series; it’s in commercials and on cable movies and cartoon shows. And it seems to be growing.”¹⁹

Findings for the 1994-95 through the 1996-97 television seasons are discussed below as two independent television monitoring studies are reviewed -- the UCLA Television Violence Report, and the cable television funded National Television Violence Study. For the 1994-95 season, the reports indicated that although network executives appeared to be responding to pressure to reduce TV violence, there was room for significant improvement. The UCLA survey found that violence portrayals declined in the 1995-96 season, and gave good reports for the 1996-97 season, although two programs raised “frequent concerns” (a decrease by three programs from the previous season), and six programs raised “occasional concerns” about violence.²⁰ The National Television Violence Study researchers found that the level of violence depicted on broadcast and cable television remained steady over the three-year period observed which appeared to contradict most of the UCLA findings.²¹

The Impact of Televised Violence on Viewers

Although there is no conclusive answer to the question about how the viewing of televised violence affects everyone in society, in the aggregate, the majority of a large body of social and behavioral science research studies found that: (1) constant

¹⁶(...continued)

and PBS. The cable channels were HBO, MTV, WTBS, USA, and the independent station, WDCA.

¹⁷Center for Media and Public Affairs, *Study Finds Rise in TV Guns and Violence: Cable Movies and Cartoons Are Culprits, Not the Networks*, Press Release, September 11, 1996.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰UCLA Center for Communication Policy, “The UCLA Television Violence Report, 1997,” [<http://ccp.ucla.edu/network.htm>], 15 January 1998.

²¹*National Television Violence Study*, “New Study Reveals Glamorized Violence Continues To Pervade American Television,” News Release, [<http://research.ucsb.edu/cori/press.htm>], April 16, 1998.

viewing of televised violence had negative effects on human character and attitudes, (2) violent forms of behavior were encouraged, (3) moral and social values about violence were influenced in daily life, (4) children who watched four or more hours of TV violence a day during preschool years, probably would subsequently exhibit aggressive behavior, and (5) TV violence influenced viewers of all ages, intellect, socioeconomic levels, and both genders, among others.²²

Dr. Gerbner summed-up the Annenberg School's conclusions about the long-term impact of viewing violent television programs. Children and adults²³ appeared to experience threefold consequences from such exposure:

- (1) For a few (whose acts provoke frightful publicity), violence seems an effective quick-fix to any problem;
- (2) Many more become desensitized to violence and lose the ability to protest or to resist; and
- (3) [I]n nearly all of us, but especially in heavy TV viewers, lifelong exposure to images of violence generates a sense of insecurity and a demand for repression (more jails, more executions, more global policing) as long as it can be justified as enhancing our security. Heavy viewers live in a meaner world than their next-door neighbors who watch less television, and they act accordingly.²⁴

Findings of other prominent studies drew similar conclusions — the 1972 Surgeon General's report, *Television and Growing Up: The Impact of Televised Violence*, found a causal effect of viewing violent television programs and later aggressive behavior in children; the 1982 NIMH report corroborated the 1972 Surgeon General's study; and the 1984 U.S. Attorney General's Task Force study on Family Violence revealed that viewing TV violence contributed to acting-out violence in the home.²⁵

In 1992, the American Psychological Association (APA) concluded through its Task Force on Television and Society that,

The accumulated research clearly demonstrates a correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior — that is, heavy viewers behave more aggressively than light viewers. Children and adults who watch a large number of aggressive programs also tend to hold attitudes and values that favor the use of

²²Congressional Research Service, *Television Violence: A Survey of Selected Social Science Research*, 2.

²³Annenberg researchers estimated the impact on viewers by surveying samples of adults and children. Participants responded to questions based on what was seen on television and how they interpreted what was viewed with the facts, norms, and values of "real" life.

²⁴George Gerbner, "About Violence: Road Runner Begets Rambo," *New York Newsday*, 26 February 1993, 54-56.

²⁵For a more detailed discussion about these studies see Congressional Research Service, *Television Violence: A Survey of Selected Social Science Research*.

aggression to resolve conflicts. These correlations are solid. They remain even when many other potential influences on viewing and aggression are controlled, including education level, social class, aggressive attitudes, parental behavior, and sex-role identity.²⁶

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) reported that between 1994 and 1996, the violent crime²⁷ arrest rate declined for youth both under and over 15 years of age (15% for youth under 15, and 12% for youth 15 and older). The 1996 violent crime arrest rate, however, was still 60% higher than the 1980 rate for youth younger than 15, and 41% higher for youth 15 years and older.²⁸ The APA correlation between viewing TV violence and subsequent aggressive behavior might warrant consideration because of its possible relevance to the OJJDP findings.

Federal Government Actions Responding to the Issue

Cyclical interest about the impact of violence in television programs on the overt behavior of children and youth has occurred in Congress for over 40 years. A recurring concern of Congress has been how to encourage leaders in the television industry to be more responsible about programming accessible to young viewers. Also, Members of Congress have explored ways to assist parents in protecting vulnerable and impressionable children and youth from undesirable programming.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton expressed the desire for a cooperative effort between government and industry to address the TV violence issue rather than enacting legislative solutions.²⁹ Both of these avenues, however — government/industry cooperation, and legislative intervention — have been used to address the TV violence issue.

This section briefly discusses congressional actions from 1952, the 82nd Congress, through the 105th Congress, and activities by the Clinton Administration.

Congressional Action From the 82nd Congress Through the 103rd Congress

Since 1952, when the first hearing was held, Congress has expressed concern about TV violence and how it might influence later aggressive behavior in children and youth. Hearings were held in 16 different congressional sessions,³⁰ and over 50 legislative measures were introduced calling for monitoring, reducing, and/or ways

²⁶Aletha C. Huston, et al., *Big World, Small Screen*, 54.

²⁷Violent crimes include murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault.

²⁸Charles M. Puzzanchera, "The Youngest Offenders, 1996," *OJJDP Fact Sheet*, #87 November 1998.

²⁹Kim McAvoy, "Clinton To Weigh in on TV Violence," *Broadcasting & Cable*, 6 (December, 1993): 18.

³⁰Hearings were held in the 82nd, 83rd, 87th, 88th, 91st, 92nd, 93rd, 94th, 95th, 97th, 98th, 99th, 100th, 101st, 103rd, and the 104th congressional sessions.