Violence on Television

An Analysis of Amount, Nature, Location and Origin of Violence in British Programmes

Barrie Gunter, Harrison, Jackie
Violence on Television

Television is often accused of showing too much violence. However, it is rare that anyone stops to ask what this statement means. *Violence on Television* provides an objective analysis of the violence on television, how much there is and what form it takes.

It presents findings from the largest ever study of the depiction of violence on television carried out in Britain, funded by the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Independent Television Commission. As well as presenting a quantitative analysis of the amount of violence on television, this research places great emphasis on investigating the character of violent portrayals and the contexts in which they occur.

Barrie Gunter and Jackie Harrison present a detailed literature review, which examines previous research from around the world. They then explain the methodology and look at the problems of measuring and quantifying violence on television. They examine the specific attributes of violence, including the form it takes, its physical setting, its motives and consequences, and the nature of the characters involved as either aggressors or victims. They also examine the amount and nature of violent portrayals in different programme genres, such as films and drama, entertainment programming, news and factual programmes, and children’s programmes.

The book will be of interest to students and researchers in psychology, communication studies and media studies.

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Violence on Television

An analysis of amount, nature, location and origin of violence in British programmes

Barrie Gunter and Jackie Harrison
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Introduction

Concern about violence on television can be traced back to the earliest days of the medium. In fact, this concern has its roots in the unease that is expressed about any new entertainment medium which appeals to the masses. Such reactions were reported with the appearance of popular romantic and adventure novels in the nineteenth century and were present again in response to the growing popularity of motion pictures in the early part of the twentieth century.

In tracing the history of research into questions about violence in the media, a number of historical milestones can be identified over a period spanning more than sixty years. These were related to concerns about violence in the cinema, violence or horror on the radio, violence in comics and finally, violence on television. Much of the early research was conducted in the United States where particular theoretical approaches within the social sciences have dominated the major mass media research initiatives and traditions.

With the arrival of motion pictures in the United States in the 1920s as the first of the mass popular media, there began an almost ritual-like invoking of experimental, quantitative social science to investigate what powers such mass entertainment forms held over the public at large, which was to be repeated in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This pattern of concern, with special interest groups representing parents, educators and the church at the forefront of highly public debates lobbying their governments and political representatives about media influences, emerged during this period in other countries, the United Kingdom included. At different times, public anxieties centred on the potentially harmful effects of a particular mass medium, with television being the focal point of the public’s attention since the 1950s. The most frequent source of concern was the portrayal of violence in programmes which, according to television’s critics, could undermine the moral values of young people, teach lessons which encouraged delinquent behaviour, and play a significant part in contributing towards rising levels of crime in society. Meanwhile, those involved with the media, together with more liberal minded members of the public, countered that television could enhance a young viewer’s life in so many ways, provide a source of education and information, and offer varied forms of high-brow as well as low-brow entertainment in a convenient and cheap fashion.
Given this rhetorical stalemate, the industry and politicians turned to social scientists as impartial arbiters whose independent and objective data could be invoked to give a dispassionate account of what influences television did indeed have (see Rowland, 1983).

The scientists failed to resolve this dispute, in spite of the expectations that had been placed upon them. Arguments frequently occurred among social scientists about the quality and validity of data derived from different research methodologies, while on a more profound level, there have been debates about the efficacy of particular scientific paradigms to provide an appropriate form of analysis of the way in which the mass media can shape the public consciousness, whether for good or ill (see Gauntlett, 1995; Rowland, 1983). Mass communications research developed initially out of a research tradition in the social sciences which derived from the pure sciences. In the United States, scientists were sponsored by and worked in the service of industrial corporations which expected results with economic and wealth-creating consequences. The physical sciences were preoccupied with discovering the deterministic, universal, predictable ‘laws of nature’ in order to control them for technical purposes. This pragmatic spirit of the technical and engineering sciences was to suffuse the developing social sciences. Even by the 1950s, questions were being raised about the effectiveness of this approach to the analysis of cultural phenomena. The focus was placed on the effects of media output rather than upon the economics and value systems underpinning media productions themselves.

VIOLENCE IN THE MOVIES

The earliest coordinated social scientific research effort connected with the depiction of violence in the mass media, occurred in the 1920s in the United States. This was the decade when the motion picture industry became the major source of mass entertainment. By 1922, for example, the year when cinema audience measurement was first properly carried out, 40 million cinema tickets were sold in the United States every week. By the end of the decade, this figure had risen to 90 million, including 17 million children aged under 14 years. During this period American films took over the world market. Hollywood became the centre of the movie industry—the glamour capital of the world. Obscure people were discovered by the studios and propelled into overnight stardom, earning vast sums of money and becoming the idols of many millions of ordinary people. One interesting observation is that the content of motion pictures made in the 1920s was actually not much different from the content of movies today. One study of movies’ themes at this time found that film stories could be grouped into just ten categories. Three quarters of all movies fell into just three categories, however—love, sex and crime.

In a society that had barely emerged from the Victorian age, the themes that dominated films seemed to many to pose troublesome challenges to established
moral standards. By the mid-1920s pressure began to mount on the motion picture industry. Numerous editorials, sermons, magazine articles and other forms of public criticism raised questions and made charges that movies were a negative influence on children.

During the same period, important developments were taking place in the social sciences. Increased attention was being paid to quantitative research techniques and new methods were developed, which meant that researchers were able to get answers to questions they had previously not had the tools and techniques properly to investigate. For one thing, statistics were introduced to social science research, which facilitated a more scientific approach to opinion research. Armed with these few techniques and a growing confidence in how to use them, social scientists began to seek opportunities to undertake research into the existence, nature and extent of mass media effects on their audiences.

In 1928 William H. Short, Executive Director of the Motion Picture Research Council, invited a group of university psychologists, sociologists and educators to design a series of studies to assess the influence of the movies on children. The research was funded by a private philanthropic foundation called the Payne Fund.

The research findings were published in the early 1930s in ten volumes and represent classic works. Among the questions they tackled were whether the movies eroded moral standards and had an influence on conduct. Findings indicated that many scenes of crime and sex could be found in the movies that were contrary to moral standards of the day, but no conclusive evidence emerged that the movies actually had degenerating effects on their audiences.

Dale (1935) reported an analysis of the major themes of 1,500 films as part of the Payne Fund research and found that about one in four films had a major theme of crime and, in an in-depth analysis of 115 films, found an average of 3.9 crimes per film. His conclusions, like so many later studies of television violence, were suffused with assumptions about the harmful effects ‘due to this excessive and dramatic way of presenting crime’ (Dale, 1935, p. 140).

The study reported evidence of media effects. Research into movies’ influences on delinquency suggested that there might be a link. One study of delinquency-prone youngsters reported that motion pictures played a direct role in shaping delinquent and criminal careers. The methods and strategies of some of this work were highly criticized at the time by criminologists and specialists in the study of deviant behaviour; nevertheless the findings caused a considerable stir. Unfortunately, like many subsequent major research programmes on the mass media, the Payne Fund project was uncertain how to separate out the precise effects of media from the complex influences of family, school, church and teenage peer groups.
VIOLENCE ON THE RADIO

A few years after the Payne Fund studies had reported their findings about the movies, another stir was caused by an incident that occurred on radio. On 30 October 1938, *Mercury Theatre on the Air*, starring among others Orson Welles and John Houseman, broadcast a radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’ science fiction masterpiece *War of the Worlds*. Because the dramatization was presented in a clever newscast style, many listeners believed that the Martians really had landed. What happened that October night was one of the most remarkable media events of all time. If nothing else, the incident demonstrated that radio drama could have a powerful impact on its audience.

At the time, radio in the United States had become the primary source of information and home entertainment for the masses. The popularity of newspapers had begun to fade. It was estimated that of 32 million families in the United States in 1938, 27 million had radio. The crucial broadcast was aired one Sunday evening between 8.00 and 9.00 pm. The introduction by Welles was very realistic in regard to the time frame and events. After Welles’ introduction, an anonymous announcer read what was apparently a routine news bulletin. Twelve minutes into the show there was a newsflash announcing that a mysterious flaming object had been sighted over New Jersey. Further flashes revealed, in realistic fashion, an apparent alien invasion.

As newspaper headlines over the next day or two revealed, there were many people who believed they were listening to real events rather than a fictional dramatization. Many people panicked, leaving their homes, and even their towns or cities, in order to escape what they believed was a real invasion from Mars.

Subsequent research showed that many listeners joined the programme part of the way through, having listened through to the end of a popular radio music and variety show on a different station. They had missed Welles’ explanation at the very beginning of the programme that the events they were about to hear were fictional. Many people, missing this information and the context it provided, thought they were listening to an authentic news bulletin.

HORROR COMICS

During the 1950s in the United States, there was renewed concern about the role of mass media in juvenile delinquency. Senate hearings insisted on getting from behavioural scientists conclusive evidence of long-term harmful effects of media. Unfortunately, psychologists and representatives of the new field of communications could only give conflicting theories of media and delinquency, which made reference to such mechanisms as catharsis, arousal and social learning (imitation). Politicians were further dismayed by social scientists who argued their cases on the basis of significant correlations between media and behaviour, which did not offer the direct proof of causality needed for legislation.
Attention switched, at one point, to a popular printed entertainment medium of that time—horror comics. This attention was triggered by the appearance of a book called *Seduction of the Innocent* by a psychiatrist, Dr Frederick Wertham. He argued that comic books were, contrary to what their name suggested, not in the least bit funny. Instead, at their worst, they were turning children into dangerous juvenile delinquents; at best, they were giving children who read them a distorted view of the world. They were also blamed by Wertham for contributing to reading problems.

Throughout his book Wertham catalogued instances where children supposedly initiated violent acts found in crime comics. He claimed that ‘there is a significant correlation between crime comics reading and the more serious forms of juvenile delinquency’. Reduced to its simplest terms, Wertham’s argument was that

1. comic books were read by a large number of children;  
2. a large component of the comic diet consisted of crime, violence, horror and sex; and therefore  
3. children who read the comics were necessarily stimulated to the performance of delinquent acts, cruelty, violence and undesirable social behaviour.

Perhaps the most significant impact of Wertham’s work was to nearly destroy the comic book industry. Theoretically, however, there were inconsistencies in his analysis. His evidence for comic book effects on delinquent tendencies in youngsters, based as it was on interviews with children in clinical settings, was often unsystematic and ambiguous in its potential interpretations, creating more questions than answers. Even media researchers who did utilize systematic modes of investigation were unable to produce results which offered conclusive evidence of media effects.

**VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION**

Since the 1950s when television broadcasting became widespread in the United States and the United Kingdom, the attention of social science researchers has been predominantly drawn to this medium, particularly with reference to the possible impact its depictions of violence might have upon viewers. Although much of this research has been focused upon the potential impact of violent television on children (e.g., Himmelweit *et al.*, 1958), who are regarded as especially susceptible to media effects, there has been wider public concern about television violence and its influences on the audience as a whole.

During the 1960s, as television became increasingly well established, competing channels and stations engaged in a fierce race for audiences and advertising revenues. One aspect of this changing environment was the introduction of more and more attention-gripping programmes featuring fast-
paced action and simple storylines—with themes commonly centred around westerns, crime, and espionage—many with the stock feature of violent resolutions to problems. Even then, despite calls for a tightening of regulations (the need for greater self-regulation in the United States, and the need for a more active external regulator and greater emphasis on research establishing viewers’ needs and interests in the United Kingdom), there was no call for an analysis of the relationship between the medium’s economic foundations and its programme content (Rowland, 1983). Instead, researchers offered more and more complex forms of analysis based on the increasingly fashionable multi-variate computational techniques that were becoming available. These often gave the appearance of having greater scientific weight and credibility, but came little closer to establishing the kind of causal evidence governments needed to support new legislation.

The debate about the effects of television violence has frequently been accompanied by calls for tighter controls over television content and the way it is regulated. These demands have emphasized the need to establish the extent of violence on television as a basis for developing public policy in the area. It has become clear, however, that the measurement of television violence is a complex problem to which there are no ready or clear cut solutions. One complication is the fact that the meaning of violence can vary widely from one individual to another. A portrayal that is perceived as extremely violent by one viewer may be seen as relatively innocuous by another. Attempts by professional researchers to make statements about the violence profile of television on the basis of quantitative data derived from simplistic definitions of ‘violence’, without any recourse to public values, attitudes and perceptions, are fraught with conceptual difficulties because the television violence ratings of professional researchers may differ in significant respects from those which would be applied by ordinary viewers. The perception of television violence can vary according to the kind of violence, the context in which it occurs, the nature of the perpetrator and victim, the consequences which follow from it, the types of weapons employed, and the reasons why it occurred (see Gunter, 1985). These are matters which need to be borne in mind by those who attempt to develop procedures for measuring the amount of violence on television, since they may largely determine the meaning that the subsequent results might have (Watsons et al. 1991).

Television came under particularly close scrutiny at the beginning of the 1970s. In the United States, fear about rising crime, concern about inner city riots and college campus rebellions against the Vietnam war, together with other forms of civil unrest, gave many the impression that the fabric of American society was being ripped apart. These anxieties were brought into sudden and dramatic focus by the assassinations of four prominent public figures: John F.Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy. In response to public concern surrounding these incidents, in 1968 President Johnson set up a National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. Among the possible causal agents investigated was television. The report by the
Commission’s Media Action Group did not find television to be a substantial cause of social violence.

Following soon after this report came another large US investigation which, on this occasion, focused specifically on television’s alleged effects upon social behaviour. The Surgeon General’s Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour was set up in 1969 to investigate the effects of television violence on children’s attitudes and behaviour. Controversy surrounded this research programme before it got under way, however, because TV network representatives on the Committee blackballed seven leading social scientists distinguished for their past research and expertise on the subject of television violence. Further arguments followed the publication of the five-volume report and summary document published in 1972 mainly because according to some analysts, the summary played down the negative findings of some of the studies. The main conclusions were that:

1 television content is heavily saturated with violence;
2 children and adults are spending more and more time watching this content;
3 there is some evidence that on balance viewing violent television entertainment increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour among viewers.

The studies commissioned under the US Surgeon General’s research programme examined the extent to which violence occurred on television output; noted different kinds of effects television violence might have upon viewers, with special reference to children; and introduced some new methodologies designed to shed light on how people used and responded to television. Content analysis studies, which attempted to quantify violence on television, were commissioned from researchers outside the United States as well as from American researchers. Thus, an attempt was made to produce comparative international data about violence on television, with studies carried out in Britain (Halloran and Croll, 1972) and Israel (Shinar et al., 1972). In addition to assessing the amount of violence on television, this research programme also addressed the issue of how violence on television is perceived by viewers. Findings emerged which indicated that viewers did attach different weight or degrees of seriousness to different types of violent behaviour (Greenberg and Gordon, 1972b, c). These perceptual distinctions provided indications that not all forms of televised violence are judged in the same way by even young viewers.

One of the major recommendations of the US Surgeon General’s report was for an ongoing index of violence levels in television programming. The most important of these indices was developed by Professor George Gerbner and his colleagues at the Annenberg School of Communication, University of Pennsylvania. This system mechanically recorded all apparent violent actions—regardless of meaning or context—in order to provide an objective and quantitative measurement of incidence of violence. This analysis discounted any
subjective variances in reactions to violence one might find among different members of the mass audience. A more detailed look at this research will be taken later in this chapter.

**Major issues**

There are several major issues relating to the depiction of violence on television. These typically relate to accusations levelled against television about its alleged enthusiasm for featuring violence in programmes as an apparently essential ingredient of entertainment, and the impact that such material can have on viewers, especially upon children. A number of common assumptions are made in the recurrent public debate about television violence. First, it is frequently argued that television contains a great deal of violence. Second, there is a common belief that regular viewers are therefore exposed to large quantities of violence during the course of their everyday television watching. Third, it is assumed that constant exposure to violent content in programmes must have a deleterious effect upon viewers and contributes, as a causal factor, to the enactment of antisocial behaviour in society.

This volume will not examine all of these issues, but the research on which it reports does have an important bearing on a number of statements critics have made about television, particularly those which refer to the amount of violence on television. This work and its findings, in turn, have implications for the amount of violence on the small screen to which viewers can be exposed.

**MEASURING VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION**

The focus of this book is upon an objective, quantitative analysis of the amount of violence on British television. Traditionally, the most commonly used method for assessing how much violence television programmes contain is known as content analysis. When measuring violence on television, researchers using content analysis begin by setting up an ‘objective’ statement of what they mean by violence. Violence is defined in broad terms. Accompanying this definition will be a frame of reference which specifies how and where that definition should be applied in the assessment of programmes. This instructional frame of reference is given to teams of trained coders who watch samples of programmes recorded from television and count up incidents which match the definition of violence drawn up for the purposes of the analysis. This enables researchers to produce a quantitative assessment of the ‘amount’ of violence on television in terms of the numbers of violent incidents or events catalogued by coders.

Content analysis does not provide a measure of the effects of television violence, nor does it provide any sort of indication of public opinion about violence on television. Its aim is purely to yield an indication of the extent and location of particular classes of incident or event in television programmes. This research methodology attempts, as far as possible, to exclude any element
of subjective judgement about violent television portrayals. All violence tends to be treated in the same way by a content analysis, regardless of the type of programme or dramatic context or setting in which it occurs. Thus, cartoon violence, for example, is treated no differently than violence occurring in a contemporary drama series. Traditionally, content analysis researchers define the intensity of violence in a programme in terms of the numbers of certain kinds of incidents it contains, rather than in terms of the nature of those incidents. This type of measurement does not, of course, reflect the way in which viewers might respond to violence on television. Research on viewers’ perceptions of television violence has shown that viewers differentiate between violent portrayals on the basis of the context in which they occur, the form of violence displayed, and the types of characters involved as perpetrators or victims of violence (Gunter, 1985). The important objective in content analysis, however, is consistency and reliability of assessment across different coders (see Krippendorf, 1980; Wimmer and Dominick, 1994). It is essential that different coders should use the coding frame in the same way and produce the same or very similar incident counts, otherwise it would be impossible to obtain accurate measures of what has happened on television.

Even within the content analysis perspective, it is possible to utilize different definitional terms of reference. Content analysis methodologies can vary in terms of the definitions of violence they use, the way in which they sample programmes and the degree of detail they obtain about violence on television. Most content analysis, however, places emphasis on the specification of profiles and structures of programme content. With regard to the measurement of television violence, the commonality in the application of this technique lies in the objective counting of incidents which match a single normative definition of violence.

Early content research

The earliest content analysis studies of violence on television occurred in the early 1950s in the United States. Smythe (1954) reported evidence from several studies sponsored in 1952 and 1953 by the National Association of Educational Broadcasters. In one week of content analysis of prime-time output on seven New York City channels, any acts or threats of violence that occurred in all programmes except news, current affairs and sports shows were recorded. Altogether 3,421 acts and threats were observed, averaging 6.2 violent incidents per hour. Serious drama shows accounted for 87% of all violent portrayals, an average of about ten incidents per hour. Crime-drama contributed 28% of all violent incidents and western drama a further 23%.

Turning his attention next to violence in children’s programmes, Smythe found a much higher incidence of aggressive acts than in adult programming, although perhaps more important than the actual volume of violent episodes here is the way they were distributed throughout different categories of programmes.
Children’s fictional entertainment programmes had three times the frequency of violent acts or threats recorded in adult programmes, but this was largely a reflection of the very high incidence of violence in children’s comedy and cartoon programmes, which averaged nearly 37 incidents per hour. In fact, about one-quarter of all violence observed in adult and children’s programmes monitored by Smythe occurred in a humorous context.

Remmers (1954) reported an increase in television violence from 1952 to 1954 based on single week samples. Acts of violence (including physical or psychological injury) nearly doubled from 1953 to 1954 from 6.2 violent acts per hour to 11 acts per hour. Testimony presented to the US Senate Sub-committee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency hearing in 1962 indicated that action/adventure programmes increased between two- and threefold in four cities between 1954 and 1961 and yet an analysis of 80 programmes in this category in 1961 found only 319 episodes of violent assaultive behaviour —a rate of four episodes per programme (around six acts per hour), below that reported for 1953.

Schramm et al. (1961) coded the number of violent incidents occurring in 100 hours of weekday programming broadcast between 4.00 pm and 9.00 pm during one week in October 1960 on four television channels in the San Francisco area. Schramm et al. observed that violence was a prevalent feature of children’s programming put out by these television stations, with shootings and fist-fights occurring frequently. Once again, though, much of this violence was found in comedy programmes.

Unlike many researchers using content analysis, Schramm et al. made a clear distinction between incidents occurring in humorous and serious contexts and based their measures of the volume of television violence exclusively on the content of non-humorous programmes. While providing some early insights into the amount of violence on television, these various American studies from the 1950s and 1960s are difficult to compare because they used different definitions of violence, different television programme samples and different coding frames. The US government-sponsored research programme on violence at the end of the 1960s saw the birth of an annual content analysis project which would run for many years and, for the first time, yield trend data based on a common analytical framework.

**Cultural Indicators project**

The most extensive quantitative content analysis of television violence was carried out by Gerbner and his colleagues of the Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania. This group analysed violence on network television in the United States over a period spanning nearly 20 years. Their primary focus was on prime-time evening television (7.30 pm to 11.00 pm) and Saturday and Sunday daytime television (8.00 am to 2.30 pm). The analysis was limited to dramatic entertainment programmes. News, documentaries,
variety and quiz shows, and sports programmes were excluded. The samples taken annually for Gerbner’s content analyses were typically single weeks of all dramatic fiction, including cartoons. In response to criticisms that one week was too small a sample, seven weeks were taken in 1976, yielding 409 programmes (Signorielli et al., 1982). By the mid-1980s, the data base apparently covered 2, 105 programmes (Gerbner et al., 1986). After 1980, however, published analyses of the Violence Profile became more sporadic.

A single normative definition of violence was used: ‘the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon) against self or other, compelling action against one’s will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing’ (Gerbner, 1972, p. 31). Further specifications were made that the incidents must be plausible and credible; but that no idle threats should be included. However, violent accidents or natural catastrophes, whose inclusion in dramatic plots was reasoned by Gerbner to be technically non-accidental, were included (Gerbner and Gross, 1976). The violence definition emphasized incidents resulting in the infliction of injury or suffering, but largely ignored the context in which incidents occurred. Any events likely to cause or actually causing injury to a character on screen were catalogued and given equivalent weightings of intensity or seriousness whether they occurred in contemporary drama or animated cartoons.

Using the above scheme to guide them, a team of trained coders was employed to record such features as the frequency and nature of violent acts, the perpetrators and victims of violence, and the temporal and spatial settings in which the acts occurred. From certain combinations of these measures, Gerbner derived the ‘Violence Profile’ which purported to represent an objective and meaningful indicator of the amount of violence portrayed in television drama.

The Violence Profile itself comprised two sets of indicators: the Violence Index and the Risk Ratios. The amount of violence occurring on television was represented by the Violence Index. Essentially this index represented the percentage of programmes containing any violence at all, the frequency and rate of violent episodes per programme and per hour, and the number of leading characters involved in violence either as aggressors or as victims.

The Risk Ratios signified a character’s chances of involvement in violence in television drama programmes and, once involved, the likelihood of positive or negative consequences for them. The Risk Ratios also represented a composite of more than one measure: the violence-victim ratio, which denoted the chances of being an aggressor or a victim, while the killer-killed ratio denoted the risk of killing or being killed. Both ratios were catalogued within each dramatic and demographic category for a wide spectrum of character types.

The Violence Index

This index is comprised of three types of direct observational data called prevalence, rate and role. They showed the extent to which violence occurred at
all in the programmes monitored and were combined according to a formula as shown in Table 1.1. Prevalence represented the percentage of programmes containing any violence in a particular programme sample. Rate expressed frequency of these acts in units of programming and in units of time and each of these frequencies was entered into the Index. Role was defined as the portrayal of characters as perpetrators of violence, or ‘violents’, and as those who were subordinated to violence or victims. This category yielded several measures: % of ‘violents’ out of all characters in a sample; % of victims out of all characters in a sample; % of all characters who featured as violents or as victims (%V); % of killers out of all characters in a sample; % of killed out of all characters in a sample; and % of all those involved in killing either as killers or killed (%k). Only %V and %k measures were entered into the index.

Table 1.1 Computation of Gerbner Violence Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formula</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Violence Index</td>
<td>%p + 2(R/P) = 2(R/H) + %V + %k</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%p</td>
<td>percentage of programmes studied in which there is violence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R/P</td>
<td>number (or rate) of violent episodes per programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R/H</td>
<td>number (or rate) of violent episodes per hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%V</td>
<td>percentage of leading characters involved in violence—either as violent or victim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%k</td>
<td>percentage of leading characters involved in killing—either as killer or killed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Gerbner, 1972

Throughout the 1970s, Gerbner et al. (1986) monitored levels of violence in prime-time television drama programming in the USA. This work began in the 1967–68 television season. During the next ten years, an average of 80% of programmes contained violence and 60% of major characters were involved in violence. The average rate of violent episodes was seven and a half per hour, and in weekend, daytime children’s programmes, violent episodes averaged almost 18 per hour. Indeed, programmes directed at children typically scored high on most measures of violence except for killing; cartoons in particular consistently exceeded all other categories of programmes, including adult action-adventure and crime-detective shows.

The overall rates of violence found by Gerbner et al. remained very consistent over the years, averaging five or six acts of overt physical violence per hour on prime-time television (Gerbner et al., 1986). The rates of violence per programme averaged 4.81 acts for prime-time television and 5.77 per programme for weekend daytime television.
Risk Ratios

The Risk Ratios component of the Violence Profile was designed to analyse patterns of portrayals among certain groups of the television population and thus to represent in an objectively quantifiable way the intrinsic power structure of the violent fictional society which is brought by television into the homes of viewers. This phase of Gerbner’s analysis began by coding the involvement of different character-types in violent episodes. An ‘involved’ character was defined as one who takes part in a scene of overt physical force and who either committed or suffered violence, or both.

According to Gerbner et al., the portrayal of violence on television drama programming demonstrated a pattern of unequal relative risks among characters of different sex, age, socio-economic and ethnic groups, in which certain character types were victimized consistently more often than others. Victimization risk data reported for prime-time television samples between 1969 and 1978 have indicated that victims are generally more prevalent than perpetrators of aggression but that the ratio of attackers to victims was greater for some character types than others. Whilst men were much more likely than women overall to become involved in violence of some kind, once involved they were much less likely than their female counterparts to be victimized.

Risks of victimization were high among children and adolescents and unmarried women, and were especially high for elderly women who were more than three times as likely to be victims as aggressors when involved in violence. Further analyses indicated that ‘good’ male characters were more likely to be killers than killed. Good female characters were much more likely to be fatally victimized than ‘bad’ female characters, even though they were less often involved in violent episodes.

The Cultural Indicators project continued into the 1980s and revealed that the world of American network television was characterized more by stability than change. Despite year-on-year fluctuations in levels of violence, the general patterns of involvement in violence among different social groups were very consistent across a 20-year period (Gerbner et al., 1986). The index of violence reached its highest level since 1967, when the study began, in the 1984/85 television season. Eight out of every ten prime-time programmes contained violence at that time, and the rate of violence was nearly eight incidents per hour. The 19-year average was six per hour. Children’s programmes were customarily found to be saturated with violence on American television. During the 1984/85 season, the average rate of occurrence was 27 violent acts per hour, compared with the 19-year average of 21 acts per hour for children’s programmes.

According to Gerbner (1988), the mid-1980s report brought up to date the cumulative results of the analysis of violence as a demonstration of power. For every ten male characters on prime-time network television who committed violence, there were 11 who fell victim to it. But for every ten female
perpetrators of violence, there were 16 female victims. ‘As television drama goes down the social pecking order, it raises the price to be paid for getting involved in violence. Foreign women and women from ethnic minority groups pay the highest price. For every ten perpetrators from these groups there are 21 and 22 victims respectively’ (p. 17).

**Other American research**

Early American studies of television in which occurrences of violence on the small screen were monitored have already been mentioned earlier in this chapter (e.g., Smythe, 1954; Schramm et al., 1961). Further content analysis studies were conducted during the 1970s and 1980s by researchers working independently of the Gerbner group.

Clark and Blankenberg (1972) analysed the synopses of programmes offered in October weeks on *TV Guide* from 1953 to 1969, coding all ‘prime-time’ programmes that appeared to contain violence. They reported reasonable agreement between synopsis coding and direct coding of programmes in a reliability study where 78 programmes were coded using both methods.

The synopsis coding led to an underestimate of violent programmes compared with direct coding (35% by synopsis coding; 43% by direct coding). Clark and Blankenberg found that overall, 27% of programmes could be described as violent but their data did not suggest increases over the sample period. Thus, the overall proportion of violent programmes from 1953 to 1959 was 29% compared with 27% from 1963 to 1969.

The authors pointed out that considerable variation took place from year to year, apparently following a four-year cycle with peaks in 1955 (27% of programmes violent), 1959 (41% violent), 1963 (29% violent) and 1967 (38% violent). However, as with almost all content analyses, some caution must be urged given the small samples. For example, the peak of 1967 is provided by only 20 violent programmes while the trough of 1961 is given by 13 programmes. Larger samples might smooth out these cyclical trends.

CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System, 1980) carried out its own monitoring from 1973/74 to 1978/79. This study may be compared with that of Gerbner and his colleagues for similar samples of prime-time television only for their rates of violent acts per hour (see Table 1.2).

<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gerbner</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Comstock (1982)*
There was little agreement between the two studies except that 1978/79 displayed the lowest violence score in both samples. The Gerbner study suggested rates of violence some two and a half times greater than those reported by CBS. This discrepancy is partly explained by the more generous definition of violence given by Gerbner, which included natural disasters exhibited by CBS, and by the programme types included (CBS would have excluded cartoon comic violence) and by differences in the sampling unit taken.

Even the Gerbner definition has been challenged, however, for being too narrow. Being restricted as it was to acts of physical aggression, it omitted to take into account other forms of violent activity which commonly occur in everyday life and on television. As Stein and Friedrich (1975, p. 190) pointed out, ‘Virtually all of the research on television content and behaviour limits the definition of violence to physical injury or damage. The verbal abuse, aggressive humour and control over other people by threat or imperative that are so prevalent on television are not included in most investigations.’ Another problem was that it failed to distinguish between cartoons, comedy and action adventure drama, treating incidents of violence throughout as being exactly the same in terms of the seriousness and meaning (Gunter, 1985).

Another research group did, however, take this point into account in a content analysis study of US television conducted over a three-year period in the late 1970s (Greenberg et al., 1980). This analysis was based on an expanded range of antisocial behaviour that included verbal aggression, deception and theft. Verbal aggression was the single largest category of antisocial acts in all three seasons and constituted a majority in two of the three seasons. Like Gerbner, Greenberg et al. focused on dramatic fiction presented in prime-time and Saturday morning television, so the extent of portrayals of aggression in other types of programming and at other times of the day was not established.

Using their broader definition of aggression to include verbally aggressive behaviour, Greenberg and his colleagues observed averages of 14.5, 15.2 and 23.2 acts of physical aggression and 23.8, 18.9 and 23.2 acts of verbal aggression per programme hour for the 1975–76, 1976–77 and 1977–78 seasons, respectively. The Annenberg group focused on physical violence and reported a mean of 5.21 incidents per programme hour across the years 1967–79 (Signorielli et al., 1982). Greenberg et al. (1980) found fairly equal amounts of prosocial and antisocial behaviours on screen. They counted a total of 42.7 prosocial acts per hour against 35 antisocial acts in 1975–76, and averages of 47 and 43 in the two subsequent television seasons. The high levels of verbal aggression noted by Greenberg on prime-time television in North America were corroborated by Williams et al. (1982).

Taylor and Dozier (1983) and Boemer (1984) studied violence in television series from 1950 to 1976 and in radio ‘thriller drama’. Crime programmes generally were found to sanction the use of deadly force to enforce the law and protect the status quo. Interestingly, black television characters in violent
television programmes were usually found to be portrayed as policemen or collaborators with law enforcement.

The National Television Violence Study

The latest and most substantial American study of violence on television is the National Television Violence Study funded over three years (1994–97) by the national Cable Television Association in the United States. This study developed an elaborate methodology which assessed not just the quantity of violence depicted on American television, but also the nature of violent portrayals and context within which violence occurred (Potter et al., 1996; Wilson et al., 1996a).

The National Television Violence Study developed a definition of violence which embodied three concepts: the notion of credible threat of violence, the overt occurrence of violent behaviour, and the harmful consequences of unseen violence. The idea of credible threat covered situations where an individual threatened another in such a way that there was a realistic likelihood that violence would follow, with the perpetrator having the clear means to carry out such action. The harmful consequences of unseen violence covered scenes where someone is depicted suffering some kind of pain or discomfort, and indeed actual physical damage may be shown, and where other clues from the storyline establish that they were a victim of violence.

Much emphasis was placed on the context in which violence occurred and an elaborate framework of analysis was created to enable a comprehensive classification of violence in terms of a range of attributes: its dramatic setting, motivational context, graphicness, rewards and punishments, severity of consequences for victims, physical form, and the nature of the perpetrators and victims. All these factors were rationalized in terms of their significance as possible mediators of audience response to media depictions of violence as signalled by the published research literature on media violence effects (Wilson et al., 1996a).

To underpin the emphasis on context the units of analysis adopted by this study were not restricted to the simple counting of individual acts of violence, as in previous studies of this sort. Three levels of measurement were devised: (1) the PAT; (2) the scene; and (3) the programme. A PAT represented an interaction between a perpetrator (P), an act (A), and a target (T). A sequence of PATs, either continuous and uninterrupted or separated by brief cutaways or scene changes, might comprise a violent scene and afforded an opportunity to examine relationships between discrete acts. Finally, the researchers here argued that larger meanings could be conveyed by the pattern of violence considered as a whole within a programme, which could only be effectively interpreted when analysed along with the context in which it was presented in the programme.

This study analysed a far larger sample of programme output than any previous American content analysis of televised violence. In total, the project
sampled nearly 2,500 hours of material. The sample was not restricted to peak-time, unlike most earlier work. Furthermore, it used a random sampling frame to select programmes for analysis over a period of 20 weeks on 23 separate television channels. This provided for a more representative sampling of television output than the convenience sampling methods used by earlier published studies.

The first year of this study found a total of more than 18,000 violent interactions in the sample of programming monitored. Violence occurred in a majority (57%) of these programmes. Two-thirds of these incidents (66%) involved a perpetrator committing an actual behavioural act of violence. Far fewer interactions involved credible threats (29%) where the perpetrator demonstrated a clear intent to physically harm the target with the means to do so, and a small proportion of incidents (3%) involved depictions of the harmful consequences of unseen violence.

Violent programmes were found to vary quite a bit in terms of the number of violent interactions they contained. The frequency of violent interactions per programme ranged from one to 88. Most of the programmes, however, clustered at the lower end of the frequency distribution, with 15% of programmes containing only one violent interaction, 12% containing two, and 10% containing three. This meant that slightly more than one-third of all violent programmes contained between one and three violent interactions. Another one-third contained between five and eight violent interactions, and the remaining one-third featured nine or more violent interactions.

The prevalence of violence varied significantly by programme genre. A higher percentage of movies and drama series contained violence compared to the overall average of television, whereas fewer comedy series, reality-based shows, and music videos contained violence. Perpetrators of violence were far more likely to be male than female, and in the majority of cases were individuals working on their own rather than in a group. Most violent characters were human, although over one in five were anthropomorphized animals or supernatural creatures. Perpetrators were mostly young to middle-aged adults; very few perpetrators of violence on television were children, teenagers or elderly people. Most perpetrators were white, with relatively few being members of any other particular ethnic group. The victim profile was very similar to the perpetrator profile.

In the case of four out of ten violent incidents, perpetrators used parts of their own body to hit, punch or kick their target. When weapons were used, hand held firearms were the most common. The next most common weapon type involved the use of unconventional instruments of aggression such as ropes or chairs. Violence was extremely graphic in its portrayal on relatively rare occasions. Nearly half of all incidents of violence were classified as occurring in purely fantasy settings, while more than four in ten were classed as fictional. Few incidents were regarded as real. Violent incidents were slightly more likely to be punished than rewarded. In about three in ten cases, violence was accompanied
by self-condemnation by the perpetrator, or was criticized or punished by another person or by some form of authority, while self or other punishment followed in around four in ten cases. Immediate punishment for violence, however, was not common. In well over four in ten cases, no physical injury followed violence, and more than one in three incidents depicted unrealistic harm. On balance, violence on American television in 1994–95 was found to be largely sanitized. It was rarely punished immediately and rarely caused observable harm to victims.

VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Studies of the depiction of violence on the small screen have been carried out in countries beyond the United States. Before turning to results for Britain, it might be worth reviewing the evidence from a number of other countries. Some of these national studies adopted the content analysis framework and violence definition of Gerbner. At the time of Gerbner’s early work for the Surgeon General’s inquiry into television and social behaviour at the beginning of the 1970s, there were attempts in other countries to use the same approach to provide comparative evidence from beyond the United States. These other efforts, however, were not entirely successful. Researchers in Sweden gave up on the idea almost before they started. They felt, after viewing material from their own television services, that there was so little violence (and sex) that an elaborate analysis schedule was rendered meaningless (Gurevitch, 1972). An Israeli study fared only slightly better, producing just ten dramatic fiction programmes from its sample of television output, with violent acts running at an average 3.8 per programme.

Violence on Canadian TV

In recent years, the US government has been feeling pressure to bring violence on television under control not only from its own citizenry but also from those of foreign countries, especially where the latter are importers of substantial amounts of American productions. This point applies with particular acuity in the case of the United States’ closest neighbour, Canada, where so many American programmes are routinely broadcast (Brown, 1994).

Canadian studies found that, in general, editorial and programme mix determined not only the amount but in some cases the nature of violence in the media. Linton and Jowett (1977) studied feature films and concluded that of all incidents involving conflict, 50% depicted violence, with an average of 13.5 violent incidents per film. Non-Canadian films contained about twice as many violent incidents as those produced in Canada. These incidents occurred most frequently in action films, including crime drama.

Comparative analyses of violence in newspapers, radio and television in Canada and the United States were conducted by Gordon and Ibson (1977) and
Gordon and Singer (1977) for the Royal Commission on Violence in the Communication Industry. Of the 8,000 news items analysed, 45% related to conflict and violence. Of 2,400 news items broadcast on 15 Canadian and American television stations, 48% were related to conflict and violence. However, almost 60% of lead items in both media were related to violence and conflict.

The American media were found to place greater emphasis on homicide and other physical violence than the Canadian, while the latter showed more of other types of conflict and property damage. Direct, physical violence (including natural and man-made disasters) was about 10% more common in television news than in newspapers. Television was more likely to personalize violence in terms of private gain or deviance.

Differences between French and English language television in Canada were found by Caron and Couture (1977) to relate again to the programme mix: English-speaking markets received more American crime drama. Content analyses of seven French-language serials popular in Quebec indicated that the majority of conflicts presented in the serials were nonviolent and mostly verbal. In the 27% of conflict scenes that did involve physical violence, the violence was usually humorous and off-screen.

Williams et al. (1982) carried out content analysis research as part of work commissioned by the Ontario Royal Commission on Violence in the Communication Industry (1977). Programmes were selected for analysis on the basis of audience viewing figures. Canadian Bureau of Broadcast Measurement (BBM) data for the Toronto area for January 1976 were used to select the top 100 programmes (excluding news, sport and public affairs) for each of the adult (19+), teenage (12–18) and child (11 and under) viewing populations.

In all, 109 programmes were used, covering 81 hours of television output. Twenty-two per cent of these programmes were produced in Canada; 76% were from the United States. Williams et al. chose to examine different types of aggression, including, but not only, physical violence, along with milder forms of conflict.

Conflict, aggression and violence were considered to differ in degree and to form a hierarchy. Each programme segment was first coded as containing no conflict or some degree of conflict. Conflict was then designated as argument, as non-aggressive conflict or as aggressive conflict. Aggressive conflict was designated as aggression or violence according to the following definitions: Aggression is behaviour that inflicts harm, either physically, including explicit or implicit threats and nonverbal behaviours. Violence was physically aggressive behaviours that do, or potentially could, cause injury or death. Lower levels of conflict were superseded by more severe forms. For example, if an argument led to aggression (within the same programme segment), the segment was coded as aggressive, and the context as argument.

Williams et al. catalogued an average of 18.5 acts of aggression per programme hour. A total of 594 acts of physical aggression involving the body (assault or
battery) or a weapon (typically a gun or object not intended for aggression) were observed. These broke down into 254 acts which involved the use of a body part (which occurred at a rate of 3.1 per programme hour) and 340 acts involving the use of a weapon (4.2 per programme hour). In addition, there were 135 acts involving physical threat (1.7 acts per programme hour) and 274 acts involving the use of verbal threat (3.4 per programme hour). Altogether there were 632 acts of verbal aggression (verbal threat, verbal abuse and sarcasm), representing 42.1% of all aggressive acts and a mean rate of 7.8 acts per programme hour.

Different levels of aggression were found in different programme categories. Relatively few segments of instruction/religion (7.7%), game shows (10.2%) and non-animated children’s shows (12.2%) depicted aggression. There was a low level of aggression in drama/medical programmes (6.9%). Higher levels of aggression occurred in animated programmes (27.8%), crime shows (27%) and situation comedies (40%).

If all forms of conflict were combined, situation comedies ranked highest (58%), followed by crime (40%) and animated shows (32.9%), with adventure (23%) and drama/medical programmes (21.6%) portraying lesser amounts of conflict. Most (59%) of the aggression in situation comedies was verbal, whereas most of the aggression in adventure programmes (79%), animated programmes (72%), children’s non-animated programmes (61%), crime drama (72%) and documentary (88%) was physical. Less than 2% of aggression observed was accidental and most (69%) was incidental to the plot. Aggression, especially verbal abuse, was often portrayed as humorous, and there was little evidence of consequences. For more than 81% of recipients of aggression (i.e., victims) no visible injury occurred. Neither was much pain (3.1%) or blood (1.2%) depicted.

**Violence on TV in the Netherlands**

Research into the cultivation effects of television was carried out during the late 1970s in the Netherlands, part of which involved an analysis of television content (Bouwman and Stappers, 1984). A Dutch Violence Profile, modelled on the American system developed by George Gerbner and his colleagues, was derived from an analysis of four weeks of programming across ten broadcasting organizations in the Netherlands. This content analysis concentrated on prime-time broadcasts (8.30–10.00 pm) and pre-prime-time broadcasts comprising family and children’s programmes.

Bouwman and Stappers reported less violence on Dutch television on the whole than had been reported earlier for American television. Using the Gerbner model of analysis, the Violence Index for Dutch crime programmes during prime-time, however, was comparable with that for prime-time programmes in the United States. Crime programmes on Dutch television at this time were mainly imported from Britain and Germany, with just a handful originating from the United States.
Looking further at the relative degrees of risk of being a victim of violence on Dutch television among particular social groups, Bouwman and Stappers found that females were more vulnerable than males in line with the findings from the United States. Unmarried men were more likely to commit violence, while married men were more likely to be killed. The elderly were the most vulnerable group on Dutch television, while young adults were most likely to be killers.

**Violence on TV in Israel**

A small-scale study of violence on Israeli television was carried out as part of the Surgeon General’s investigation of Television and Social Behaviour launched in 1970. The aim was to obtain comparative data with the United States. A content analysis of programmes transmitted over a one-week period in May 1971 covered a sample of just 65 broadcasts, which included fictional drama, entertainment and news and information programmes (Shinar et al., 1972). Some of these programmes were broadcast in Hebrew and others in Arabic. Only a small number of violent incidents was catalogued, totalling 52 separate violent episodes in all. Most of these incidents (38) occurred in fictional drama programmes.

For the purposes of this analysis, a violent incident was defined as ‘a continuous action involving the same set of characters in which any act(s) that may cause physical and/or psychological injury, hurt or death to persons, animals and property, whether intentional or accidental, actually shown on the screen, suggested or verbal, take place’ (Shinar et al., 1972, p. 521). The researchers reported the percentages of programmes in different programme categories which contained any violence and the rate of violence in terms of numbers of incidents per programme. Violent incidents were also classified in terms of a variety of features including motivational context, types of injuries caused, and demography of perpetrators and victims of violence.

Adults’ programmes were more likely to contain violence than were children’s programmes. Nearly half (48.4%) of all adult-oriented programmes in Hebrew and nearly one in three (30.4%) in Arabic contained at least one violent incident. Just over one in five children’s programmes (21.1%) contained violence. Television series dealing with such themes as crime, detective stories or espionage were the most violent programmes, while long-running serials, especially historical drama, were the least violent programmes.

The majority of violent incidents were judged to have been presented in a fairly realistic style and were more likely to occur in serious than in humorous contexts. Over half the violence (55.2% of incidents) was physical and intentional, while around one in five incidents (21.1%) comprised verbal violence. One in seven incidents (15.4%) comprised threatened physical violence. The remaining incidents (8.3%) were accidental incidents. Of the physical and intentional acts of violence, most involved the use of a part of the aggressor’s body. There were few instances of violence involving guns or other
instruments of aggression. The majority of violent incidents resulted in no observable harm to victims or targets (52.7%), and most of the remainder (36.3%) produced only minor pain or suffering. Just two incidents resulted in death and two further incidents caused significant pain and suffering. For the most part (83.3% of incidents) violence produced no blood or wounds. Just two incidents (5.5%) produced a large amount of blood.

Violence was most likely to occur within the context of criminal activity (23.2%) or law enforcement activity (12.6%) underlining the earlier observation that violence on Israeli television at the time of this study occurred most often in crime drama programmes. Other ‘personal’ violence, however, was the single largest category of contexts for violence (29.2% of incidents). Small numbers of incidents occurred in war situations, in the context of civil strife or rioting, or within domestic, family contexts.

The perpetrators or instigators of violence were overwhelmingly found to be male (90.7% of incidents), while female perpetrators were found in just two incidents (9.3%). Victims of violence were also most likely to be male (69.2%), although females were clearly more likely to be victims (30.8%) than aggressors. The instigators of violence were usually ‘bad’. Among both heroes and villains, though, the perpetrators were nearly always male.

**Violence on TV in Japan**

Iwao *et al.* (1981) conducted a study of violence on Japanese television and compared it with violence on American television. They used the categories and procedures developed by Gerbner and his colleagues. The Japanese sample consisted of one week of entertainment programming from 1977 broadcast between 5.00 and 11.00 pm on five Tokyo television stations, one carrying public broadcasting and the others being commercial stations. Half of the programmes (69) were children’s programmes, of which 51 or 37% of the total were cartoons. Twenty-four programmes were foreign imports, mainly from the United States.

Iwao *et al.* (1981, pp. 30–31) distinguished three types of violence on Japanese television: random, purposive and suffering:

Random violence, so named because it tends to occur in frequent short bursts without much reference to a plot, is typically seen in cartoons and programs for children. The victim may be run over by a car and flattened like a pancake, only to rise a moment later as if nothing had happened. Violence of this type lacks realism. In many cases, the characters are not human but personified animals or objects and the violence is rarely acute.

A second type of violence, often seen in police dramas is portrayed as a means to achieving some end. Often, this purposive violence furthers the plot but need not arouse the emotions of the audience. The robber who