Violence on Television
Distribution, Form, Context, and Themes
Violence on Television
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Concern about violence on television has its roots in a familiar societal response to the appearance of any new form of public entertainment that appeals to the masses. But, once firmly established, an initial welcome is replaced by suspicion of its power to influence the public. Such anxiety usually emanates from the ruling establishment, which suspects a ubiquitous mass medium of possessing the capacity to exert significant social and political influence. Rather than attending to the positive social functions that a communications medium might serve, focus instead primarily rests on its capacity for promulgating social ills. This attitude has certainly been true with regard to the usual establishment stance toward television. Governments worry about the role such a mass medium plays in promoting antisocial conduct, religious bodies worry about its role in undermining the moral fiber of society, and advertisers, who provide much of the financial support for the medium, worry that the public images of their brands will suffer if they are advertised within violent programs.

The critics of television accuse the medium of presenting too much violence and of cynically using violence instead of quality scripts to attract audiences to its entertainment programming. It can also be observed that television appears to have developed a predilection for reality-based programs with violent themes. Fictional violence is being supplanted by real-life violence. Thus, television no longer provides pure escapism from everyday life, but all too frequently reflects it back at the public, and in doing so magnifies the presence of the negative elements in society.

The ultimate concern about television violence, however, is founded on the view that it contributes toward social violence. This process operates through a number of psychological mechanisms. The alleged preoccupation of television with violence, both in its entertainment and factual programming, may exaggerate the extent to which violence really
occurs in society, leading regular television viewers to become more fearful about their own safety. Repeated exposure to this diet of violence may also cause viewers to become habituated to it. This means that any initial emotional reactions to violence become reduced and cease to have an impact. This may, in turn, lead to a less caring or more callous disposition toward violence in reality, because violence becomes regarded as an acceptable mode of conduct. At a more individual level, research evidence has accumulated, largely through laboratory experimentation, indicating an enhanced likelihood of violent behavior among those who watch specific violent portrayals. Thus, in addition to longer term dispositional changes in viewers as a function of continued exposure to television violence over time, there may be short-term aggressive response triggered by exposure to violent incidents on screen.

The important question for those who regulate the medium and who are the appointed guardians of the public interest is whether these concerns about television are warranted. Furthermore, does the observation that television is permeated by violence ring true when the medium’s output is objectively and systematically examined? This book is concerned with shedding some light on these questions. The research on which it reports did not investigate the alleged effects of television violence. It did, however, systematically examine the extent to which violence occurred on television within a specified time frame. In doing so, it took into consideration the evidence from the media effects literature where that evidence had indicated that specific attributes of violence could enhance or reduce the degree to which harmful audience responses might occur upon viewing that violence. The research itself took place within a wholly British context, but many of the principles that it demonstrated about the distribution of violence on television probably apply to television systems elsewhere. To lend weight to this argument, a comparison was made between these British findings and data provided by a similar American study conducted at the same time. The comparisons indicated considerable degrees of similarity in the nature of television violence in the two countries on measures that were common to both studies.

Public opinion about potentially problematic television content carries considerable weight in Britain in addition to any supposed harms that may be contingent on watching screen violence. Indeed, in Britain, broadcasters are required by law to ensure that whatever they transmit does not cause offence to the audience. The evidence for psychological harms of televised violence, although not totally dismissed, is not accepted with the same conviction as it is in the United States. The evidence for harmful effects is regarded as inconclusive in Britain, although codes of practice for program makers embrace a number of harmful effects notions in the cautionary notes they sound for broadcasters. In the United States, the case for harmful effects has been largely accepted. The debate has moved on to consider what can or should be done about violence on television.
The debate about television violence in the United States is complicated by the fact that freedom of speech is protected by statute and therefore censorship is technically unconstitutional. At the same time, if it can be proven that a television broadcast contains material that people find deeply offensive, is unsuitable for children, or some individuals might react to in an antisocial manner, then there is a clear case for action of some sort to be taken. Whereas shying away from the idea of selective censorship, the alternative approach, which is more consistent with the First Amendment, is to devise a system in which media consumers are protected from exposure to content that might cause them offence or might be deemed unsuitable for young viewers. This early warning system would allow viewers to know in advance if programs contain problematic material so that they could filter it out from their own viewing diet or that of their children. The system would entail providing programs with ratings and advisories about their contents, specifically indicating whether they contained material of a violent, sexual, or profane nature. The system could be activated in an individual's (i.e., parent's) absence through a device inside the television set (V-chip) that could be set to scramble the signal for any unsuitable program the viewer wished to block out. Hence, in theory, parents could control their children's viewing even when not physically present in the home.

Although this system circumvents the conflict between censorship and freedom of speech legislation, it does not directly address the issue of harm that has been accepted within the United States in the case of televised violence. This is because the classification system for programs is not grounded in empirical evidence about adverse audience reactions to screen violence. To establish such a system would require a comprehensive taxonomy of factors known to exacerbate antisocial or undesirable audience responses to violent portrayals. The American television industry has so far opted not to devise such an early warning system for its viewers. The British television industry, likewise, lacks such a system. In addition to determining what have been called 'risk factors' in television violence (i.e., those attributes that appear to mediate adverse audience reactions), however, one would also need to monitor television to determine the extent to which potentially worrying violent portrayals occur and how they are distributed across the television schedules. In particular, it would be important to know how often portrayals occur that combine a number of these problematic attributes. Such portrayals might be especially likely to give rise to adverse audience reactions.

The research in this book was mindful of all these issues. For British television in the mid-1990s, it revealed that it would be misleading to assume that the schedules were permeated with violence. Whereas a large number of violent incidents were registered across the output that was monitored, significant proportions of this violent material were concentrated in a relatively small part of the total broadcast output analyzed. Furthermore, violent incidents characterized by high risk factors were relatively rare. This is not to say that no problematic portrayals of
violence were found. There were indeed instances of violence that were horrific, gory, graphic, painful, and bloody. However, these portrayals tended to occur in broadcasts where they might have been expected and at times of the day that were chosen because of the relative scarcity of children in the audience. This research indicates that television violence needs to be examined from a number of different measurement perspectives to achieve a balanced impression of its prevalence, amount, and distribution.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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—BG, JH, and MW
May 2001
Concern about television violence has centered on its capacity to cause both harm and offence. These consequences of violent portrayals are not the same, yet they are often conflated in debates about the responsibilities of broadcasters toward their audiences and the need for tighter regulation of programs. The alleged harms of television violence have numbered among the most publicly debated and scientifically investigated social issues (Cumberbatch, 1989; Gunter, 1994; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Potter, 1999). Offence is a matter of personal taste. The notion of harm is distinct from taste. A violent portrayal may be regarded as distasteful, but may not result in any harmful side effects. Elsewhere, audiences may enjoy a screen portrayal of violence. But, the same portrayal can also be scientifically demonstrated to give rise to potentially or actually harmful consequences if one viewer decides to copy it or if certain sections of the audience become either more accepting of such behavior or more afraid of becoming victims of such violence themselves.

The fact that some viewers may dislike televised violence may be insufficient testimony to back calls for its abolition or for stronger regulation and control of its appearance. For one thing, those critics of television violence may comprise an unrepresentative minority of the viewing population as a whole. For another, the content they wish to bring under tighter control may have no immediate or lasting adverse effects on audiences. In contrast, certain forms of televised violence may pass without comment and comprise important ingredients defining the entertainment value of a program. Yet, a case could be made for such content to be restricted or banned should convincing scientific evidence emerge that exposure to it can cause serious harms for viewers. Main-
taining this balance between the need to allow broadcasters to satisfy audience tastes and needs, and avoidance of offence or harm is an ongoing problem for media regulators.

Other issues also have an important bearing on whether televised violence represents a problem in need of serious action by social policymakers and the regulatory agencies charged with implementing rules and codes of practice. Discussion about violence has been at the heart of a wider debate about the principle of media censorship and regulation. Whereas many broadcasters have developed their own codes on the presentation of violence in programs to which producers of news, drama, and other forms of entertainment are expected to adhere, in some countries more fundamental questions have been asked about whether censorship is appropriate at all.

In the United States, for example, there is an uneasy tension between the enactment of legislation that curtails the content of broadcasts and the fundamental value of free speech, especially as it applies to the press (and other media) as outlined in the First Amendment to the Constitution. Here, it is regarded as fundamental to the principle of a democratic society for the media to be able to publish anything without political hindrance. At the same time, there is public recognition of a need for some flexibility in the interpretation of free speech rights, where some published speech might act against the best interests of the public and society at large. There may be cases when the restriction of speech is the safer social option, especially when there is a suspicion that it reduces the chances of occurrence of adverse or potentially harmful consequences. This type of argument has been used to endorse U.S. government attempts to limit the negative social effects of televised violence (Roberts, 1998).

The need to tighten legislation and accompanying regulatory controls over televised violence has resulted in part from a growing public concern about this issue. This allegedly growing concern has been fueled, in part, by evidence that has emerged from the significant body of published scientific research concluding that violent television content can harm viewers. Children, teenagers, and adults are all regarded as potentially susceptible to a range of undesirable psychological side effects following exposure to such material. It has been contended that violent portrayals provide imitable problem-solving actions, often enacted by attractive role models, that may be copied by members of the audience. Televised violence may lend justification to the use of violence by viewers themselves. Routine exposure to such content may also cause viewers to become used to witnessing violence and to adopt a less caring attitude about victims of violence. Equally, regular viewing of violence on television could create an impression among viewers that it reflects on the status of society, which as a result may be viewed as a more violent, dangerous and frightening place to live (Donnerstein, Slaby, & Eron, 1994; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1994; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Potter, 1999).
One solution to this conflict between a fundamental democratic principle and an increasingly urgent need to curtail the alleged antisocial effects of media violence has been to move away from the notion of regulatory restrictions on transmitted content and toward the idea of empowering media consumers. In practice, this solution requires the provision of more and better quality information about programs in advance of transmission so that viewers can decide whether or not they want to watch. This information should have special value for parents who wish to decide on the suitability of particular programs for their children.

In the United States, new legislation was introduced in 1996 encouraging the television industry to create a voluntary code for rating programs or to have one imposed by the broadcast industry regulator, the Federal Communications Commission (Spitzer, 1996). This proposed ratings system was also to be linked with the so-called V-chip (viewer chip) technology installed in TV sets. Under the 1996 US Telecommunications Act, all new TV sets from 2000 on must include this technology. V-chips enable viewers to block out reception of programs rated as unsuitable for children.

Much debate surrounding the V-chip, the rating system for program content, and other possible solutions reflected the conflicting concerns about protecting the public from adverse effects of media violence while preserving the integrity of the First Amendment. The press in the United States provided widespread coverage of this subject and frequently represented tighter broadcasting legislation as a threat to free speech (Hoffner, 1998). This concern was not hard to understand. The acceptance of tighter regulation of broadcast content might represent the thin end of a wedge that might eventually lead to closer examination of practices followed by the press themselves.

In the pursuant political debate about this issue, political opinion was sensitive to the allegedly prevailing public opinion on the matter. This sensitivity is understandable given the potential political ramifications of unpopular public policy decisions. Indeed, even the courts exhibited sensitivity to contemporary trends in public opinion when asked to rule on the debate, acting therefore as a barometer of social mores (Marshall, 1988).

This book examines the nature of violence on television in the United Kingdom. The research on which this investigation is based consisted of a large content analysis of terrestrial and satellite broadcast television output in the mid-1990s. As such, it comprises a descriptive study of the representation of violence on television. Although such data cannot demonstrate anything about the impact of televised violence or about public opinion toward it, there are important reasons why links should be made between purely descriptive analyses of programs and the potential of their content to give rise to certain types of audience reaction. First, a descriptive analysis of the nature of television violence establishes how serious a problem it represents. Whereas a critical press may
accuse broadcasters of loose controls over content and cite findings from public opinion surveys in support of such accusations, the only way to arrive at a comprehensive definition of the nature of what programs present to viewers is to conduct a direct analysis of programs themselves. Second, research into media violence effects and audience reactions to programs has identified specific features of violent portrayals and of the programs in which they might appear that mediate audience responses. This means that not all forms of violence give rise to the same audience reactions. Further, the same violence shown in different program settings and contexts may give rise to varying effects or reactions among viewers. Hence, the measurements taken by a content analysis can be designed to take account of these factors and to indicate the extent to which certain types of violence—which exhibit attributes rendering them likely to give rise to particular types of audience response—occur.

The need to include this kind of measurement sensitivity in content analysis studies of televised violence was increasingly emphasized by scholars working in this field during the last decade of the 20th century. Following earlier studies of audience perceptions of television violence, which indicated a need to go beyond a single definition of violence in the analysis of its on-screen representation (e.g., Gunter, 1985; Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Van der Voort, 1986), a number of studies in the 1990s embraced different levels of content measurement (Mustonen & Pulkkinen, 1993; National Television Violence Study, 1997, 1998; Potter et al., 1995, 1997). Some researchers have also referred to the need to employ a system that does not simply quantify violence in its totality, but also classifies the nature of its occurrence in terms of "risk factors" (National Television Violence Study, 1997). The latter represent attributes of violent portrayals identified in the media effects literature as playing important mediating roles in relation to the intensity or nature of viewers' responses to violence.

**IMPORTANCE OF POTENTIAL HARM**

The notion of risk factors in relation to the classification of television violence is important because it represents a conceptual link between the purely descriptive methodology of content analysis and the findings on harmful media violence effects. Although content analysis does not measure media effects, it can meaningfully embrace knowledge of such effects, especially where there is evidence that specific types of psychological impact are enhanced or reduced by the presence of mediating variables in association with violent portrayals.

The key risk factor attributes identified by the National Television Violence Study (1997) were nature of perpetrator of violence, nature of target of violence, reason for violence, presence of weapons, extent and graphicness of violence, realism of violence, rewards and punishments
associated with violence, consequences of violence for victims, and the presence of humor. These attributes have been identified in media effects research as having a mediator role in relation to learning of aggression from media, desensitization to violence consequent on exposure to media violence, and enhanced fear of personal victimization following regular exposure to media violence (National Television Violence Study, 1997, 1998).

In addition to the risk factors, it is also important to be aware of developmental differences in the way viewers react to television content. Children may respond to televised violence differently from adults. Hence, some attributes are especially significant in relation to the way children might react. The rewards and punishments associated with violent portrayals are especially important in this context. Children may learn aggressive behavior patterns from watching television. The likelihood with which such learned behaviors may be reenacted by children can depend on whether on-screen perpetrators of these behaviors are rewarded or punished for their actions. Rewarded on-screen violence is more likely to be copied, whereas punished on-screen violence inhibits the learning of aggression among young viewers (Bandura, 1986; Paik & Comstock, 1994). However, for young children to grasp the consequences of on-screen portrayals of violence, it was usually necessary for associated rewards or punishments to occur immediately after these behaviors. Children younger than age 10 have been found to be less able to grasp the links between motives and events and events and their consequences when these elements are widely separated in the narrative of the program (Collins, 1983).

Relating their catalog of on-screen violent portrayals to the known mediators of screen violence effects, the National Television Violence Study (1998) reported for mainstream U.S. network and cable television that the perpetrators of violence were mostly human, adult, White, and male, and they were more often bad guys than good guys. The targets of violence exhibited a similar character profile to perpetrators. Most violence was committed for reasons of personal gain, anger, or self-protection. Around one in three violent interactions were portrayed as justified. Guns were used in about one in four violent interactions. In addition, most televised violence was fictional but nevertheless appeared to be fairly realistic and feasible in real life. Most violence was not punished immediately; punishments were usually meted out at the end of the program. Good guys tended not to be punished for their use of violence, however. More than one half of all violence produced no observable harmful or painful consequences to victims, and very little violence was shown in graphic detail. Four in ten violent scenes were presented in a humorous context. Such an analysis, therefore, went beyond earlier numerical quantifications of violent acts on screen, to elaborate the extent to which potentially harmful portrayals of violence occurred. To go beyond this level of analysis, it will be important to discover more about the prevalence and position (in terms of program and time and day) of
violent depictions that combine a number of high risk attributes. These will be the portrayals to which closest regulatory or consumer advisory attention should be given.

IMPOR TANCE OF PERCEPTION AND OPINION

The importance of public opinion about television violence stems, in part, from its political and legal significance. Public support for censorship, for example, provides important ammunition for those political lobby groups who would wish to see more restrictive legislation introduced to curb the alleged harms of media violence. Such ammunition may be especially significant in countries like the United States, where calls for increased censorship conflict with the fundamental democratic value of protected free speech. A number of studies have indicated, however, that public support does exist for censorship of certain forms of media under appropriate circumstances. Such restrictions have received public support where they relate to violent media (Fisher, Cook, & Shirkey, 1994; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996), pornography, and especially sexual violence (Fisher et al., 1994; Gunther, 1995; Thompson, Chaffee, & Oshagen, 1990).

In the United Kingdom, public opinion about violence on television is significant because broadcasting legislation requires television producers to take necessary steps to ensure that their programs do not cause offence to viewers. Supplementary codes of practice flesh out this legal requirement, and codes on the depiction of violence are published to provide guidelines to producers both in the public and commercial sectors of television broadcasting.

The significance of public opinion data to the classification of television program content represents a tricky question in its own right. In order to determine whether such data have any value at all in this context, it is essential to examine carefully the nature of the questioning used in surveys and whether the opinions measured provide any real clues concerning how people think or feel about particular types of violence.

There is a prevailing understanding, regularly fed by newspaper-sponsored opinion polls, that the public generally believes there is too much violence on television. Such polls also reputedly reveal a significant degree of concern among the public about the possible harms caused by televised violence, especially where children are concerned. Unfortunately, few polls yield data about use of policy or editorial decisions. Frequently, these polls oversimplify public attitudes and lack the focus to pinpoint whether there are specific types of content about which citizens are mostly concerned (Gunter & Stipp, 1992). There are three other factors that should be underlined about public attitudes concerning television violence. First, viewers may at the same time voice concern about violence on television in general while exhibiting little
concern about violence in specified programs that contain violence, provided the presentation of the violence is judged to be appropriate to the story line and not gratuitous (Gunter & Wober, 1988). Second, viewers may find verbal descriptions of specific types of television violence potentially offensive, but are still willing to concede the right of others to watch such material should they wish to do so (Gunter & Stipp, 1992). Third, survey respondents may be more willing to perceive potential harm in media violence for others than for themselves, a pattern of response known as the “third-person effect” (Hoffner et al., 1999; Innes & Zeitz, 1988; Rojas et al., 1996).

The third-person effect has emerged as a particularly sensitive predictor of support for strict censorship of media. Whereas most people believe themselves to be relatively immune to adverse or harmful effects of media, they do not believe the same thing about others. The greater the perceived likelihood of adverse media effects on society or on people other than themselves, the greater the support for stricter censorship of sex and violence in the media (Fisher et al., 1994; Gunther, 1995; Hoffner et al., 1999). Greater exposure to sexual or violent media content, however, was associated with less willingness to censor such content (Fisher et al., 1994; Gunther, 1995). Those who apparently view television violence regularly wish to retain unrestricted access to their preferred entertainment. Some researchers have interpreted this finding as evidence for a desensitization effect, with heavier viewers of violence being less personally worried about it and less inclined to see it as harmful (Donnerstein et al., 1994; Hoffner et al., 1999).

These results do not indicate if particular kinds of violence are regarded as being especially problematic as potential sources of offence or harm to viewers. To find out more about this point, researchers need to use methodologies that measure viewers’ perceptions of violence more directly. Such research has identified a variety of factors that influence individuals’ judgments about the seriousness of violent actions and interactions.

In a study not directly connected with media, Forgas, L. B. Brown, and Menyhart (1980) examined the way people classified real-life aggressive scenarios. This investigation was concerned with the attributes individuals take into account when determining whether or not a particular act is defined as aggressive. Four principal characteristics emerged in this respect: (a) the perceived likelihood that the act would happen in everyday life, (b) the degree to which the sympathy lies with the aggressor or victim, (c) the degree to which the aggressor was provoked or performed a premeditated first strike, and (d) the degree to which the act was officially sanctioned or likely to evoke punishment.

In ascertaining the way viewers respond to specific content features, one approach has been to obtain opinions about extracts of media content in which those features have been isolated. In this context, for instance, media researchers have explored viewers’ perceptions of tele-
vised violence or the emotional reactions of children to frightening media content.

The immediate reactions of viewers to program excerpts have been measured in the context of identifying the attributes taken into account by individuals when judging the seriousness of televised violence. Greenberg and Gordon (1972c) presented young boys with a series of violent scenes, taken from movies and programs, which differed in terms of various attributes such as the use of weapons and degree of harm caused to victims. After each scene, respondents provided a series of evaluative ratings. Scenes in which weapons were featured or in which actors harmed themselves or another person were rated as more violent and less acceptable than scenes in which weapons were not featured or where harm, although intended, did not occur. Scenes depicting damage to another person were rated in more serious terms than scenes depicting property damage.

In another series of experiments in Britain, a similar approach was used to assess viewers’ evaluative ratings of violence-containing clips from British and American crime dramas, westerns, science series, and cartoons. After each clip, which lasted for up to 2 minutes, viewers gave their ratings along a series of 7-point adjective scales. Scenes were shown singly or in pairs for comparative judgments. The program clips were selected to isolate specific features such as genre, dramatic context, physical setting, use of weapons, degree of harm to victims, and gender or perpetrators and victims. Results showed that the perceived seriousness of violence was strongly associated with the realism of the setting, the degree of observable harm caused to victims, the use of certain types of weapon (sharp instruments), and the gender of the attacker and victim (Gunter, 1985).

Research with children, using laboratory-based experimental methodologies, has explored their emotional reactions to different types of television content. Many studies used a combination of continuous physiological measures and immediate postviewing psychological reactions. Physiological measures have included facial expressions, heart rate, and electrical conductivity of the skin (galvanic skin response, GSR). The latter measures are all known to provide reliable indicators of emotional responses. Psychological measures generally comprised verbal responses, describing their feelings or how much they liked the material shown to them.

Some studies have investigated the mediating effect of the realism of television portrayals on children’s emotional responding and enjoyment. Osborn and Endsley (1971) obtained continuous measures of GSR from 4- and 5-year-old children while they watched either a cartoon or noncartoon program excerpt that was either violent or nonviolent. A postviewing interview was then conducted with the children to find out which clip(s) they found to be “scariest.” The program featuring human characters with violence was selected as the scariest of the four clips and also produced the highest GSRs.
A Swedish study used the analysis of children's facial reactions while viewing to measure how emotionally aroused they were by different scenes of violence (Lagerspetz, Wahlroos, & Wendelin, 1978). Preteenage children were shown 5-minute extracts from television programs that depicted physical violence, verbal violence, cartoon violence, and nonviolent behavior. The children's facial expressions were videotaped while they were watching and then subsequently judged by coders trained to identify the emotional meaning of such expressions. The children viewed in pairs and were unaware of being observed for their reactions. Facial expressions were classified according to nine evaluative scales: joyful-serious, afraid-not afraid, worried-not worried, angry-indifferent, understands-incomprehension, concentrated-disttracted, tense-calm, active-immobile, and withdrawal-no withdrawal. The children were interviewed afterward to nominate their most liked film clip. The strongest emotional reactions occurred to the clips depicting the most realistic violence. Such scenes invoked the greatest expressions of fear and worry, tenseness and anger. Cartoon violence elicited joy and understanding and along with more formulaic physical violence, generated the greatest concentration.

Heart rate was used to measure degree of emotional response to televised violence in a study with preteenage children, age 8 to 11 (Surbeck & Endsley, 1979). In this investigation, the children were each shown two 3-minute video clips depicting exactly the same series of violent acts. However, one clip involved human actors and the other involved puppets. The children were tested in an experimental room designed to resemble a living room in someone's home. They were wired up to heart-beat apparatus for pretesting several days before the actual experimental session and then again while being shown the two television clips. After viewing had finished, they were taken to a separate room for further testing. Here they were shown some photographs from each clip and asked to say "how scary it was" and which clip they liked best. Neither version was overwhelmingly preferred, but the more realistic version was seen as more scary. Heart rates were observed to drop during the violent incidents in each clip, reflecting greater attentiveness at those points.

Other laboratory investigations have shown that children display higher emotional arousal when viewing television scenes in which a character displays expressions of fear than for scenes that focus on the frightening stimulus that causes those fear expressions, as evidenced through immediate postviewing verbal response of young viewers and continuous physiological measures such as galvanic skin response and skin temperature change (Wilson & Cantor, 1985).

Watching a scary film or program with someone else present can sometimes moderate children's emotional responses. In one experiment, preschool children watched one of two versions of a suspenseful movie clip, either alone or with an older brother or sister. One version portrayed the scene as a dream sequence with a prolog and epilog to provide
cues to the fact that the depicted events were part of a dream (Wilson & Weiss, 1993). This scene, taken from a television movie called *Invaders from Mars*, shows a boy following a woman into a cave. He proceeds down a long dark tunnel until he reaches a cavern in which a spaceship occupied by a number of giant creatures is found. The boy hides behind a wall and watches the women and the creatures. At this point, a commercial break occurs. The scene continues after the break. The woman notices the boy and threatens to get him. He runs out of the tunnel and escapes into the forest outside.

After watching the scene, the children were asked how scared they felt while watching it and how much they liked it. The children’s facial expressions were also continuously monitored and videotaped while they were viewing and were later categorized by coders. The preschoolers who viewed with an older sibling were no better than those who watched alone in identifying the dream sequence version, but were generally less emotionally aroused by this suspenseful scene when watching with someone else. As a result, they also liked the film better. Many of the very young children in this experiment were unable to understand and identify the cues that indicated when the sequence was portrayed as a dream.

Research has been conducted among children whose reactions to full-length programs were gauged under controlled viewing conditions. In one case, pre-children’s involvement in a program, as indicated by their degree of visual attention to the screen, was related to the degree of action, but not significantly to the amount of violence it contained (Potts, Huston & Wright, 1986).

Van der Voort (1986) measured children’s perceptions of televised violence at three schools in Holland. In all, 314 children, ages 9 to 11, were shown full-length episodes from eight television series. These series included realistic crime drama (*Starksy and Hutch, Charlie's Angels*), adventure series (*Dick Turpin, The Incredible Hulk*), and fantasy cartoons (*Scooby Doo, Tom and Jerry, Popeye, Pink Panther*).

Immediately after showing each program, a postexposure questionnaire was filled in by children measuring 10 perception variables: readiness to see violence, approval of violent actions seen in the program, enjoyment of the violence seen, evaluation of the program, emotional responsiveness, absorption in the program, detachment while watching, identification with the program’s chief characters, perceived reality of the program, and comprehension and retention of program content. Van der Voort investigated whether programs perceived to be realistic were also more absorbing for children who would thereby respond to them with more emotion and less detachment than they showed toward programs perceived to be more fantastic.

Results showed that law enforcement programs were rated as the most realistic of those programs presented to the children in this study. Thus, *Starksy and Hutch* and *Charlie's Angels* were perceived to be realistic, whereas *The Incredible Hulk, Dick Turpin*, and cartoons were seen as
fantastic. Realistic programs were watched with more involvement, more emotion, and less detachment. The two crime drama series were also regarded as containing the most violence.

It is clear from this body of research that viewers' reactions to screen violence are often mediated to a significant degree by the nature and form of the portrayed violence and by the setting or context in which it occurs. Both children and adults are sensitive to these features and display different perceptual and emotional reactions to what they are viewing as a function of the attributes associated with a violent portrayal. The perceived realism of violence has repeatedly emerged as a crucial variable that influences the perceived seriousness of a range of violent portrayals. The acceptability of violent depictions for audiences can vary with the program in which they occur. In addition, the degree of harm caused to victims of violence on screen is a key factor, especially when emotional reactions are measured. When the full horror of violence or graphic images of the pain and suffering of victims are shown, viewers' responses to televised violence are much more severe.

Yet, there are many portrayals of violence on television that do not cause viewers to react. Scenes that occur in fantasy contexts, scenes that involve animated characters, and scenes in which events occur in a humorous context may be subjectively rated as essentially nonviolent even though they contain behavior that would objectively be defined as violent in nature. On this evidence, it is important for content analysis studies to embrace, to some degree at the point of analysis or subsequent data interpretation, the known or expected reactions of viewers to specific types of violent portrayal. These reactions could represent weighting factors that enable a simple violent counting exercise to have more meaning in terms of the prevalence of violent incidents that might be problematic for audiences.

**IMPORTANCE OF ATTRACTION TO VIOLENCE**

Turning the violence debate around, questions have been asked about the attractiveness of violence to audiences and the role that it might play in drawing viewers to programs. Attraction to violence in entertainment has a history that predates the modern mass media and can be traced back to the popularity of violent sporting spectacles in Greek and Roman times (Guttman, 1998). In the present context, interest in the attractiveness of observers to screen violence centers on whether it offers any further clues about the classification of violence, in this case, in terms of what individuals enjoy watching. Within the context of contemporary broadcast entertainment, there is a conventional wisdom that violence sells—that is, it enhances audience enjoyment of programs (C. H. Hansen & R. D. Hansen, 1990).

Evidence for the attractiveness of violence on television has derived from a number of sources. Cantor (1998) identified three senses in
which the notion of the attractiveness of televised violence can be demonstrated. The first sense is the manifestation by viewers of enjoyment while viewing programs with violence. Often this is measured by observing viewers' facial reactions or degree of visual attentiveness in front of the screen. A second indicator is selective exposure, which is demonstrated when a viewer's knowledge that a program contains violence increases the likelihood of choosing to view it compared with other programs believed to contain no violence. A third indicator is genre popularity, as evidenced by the power of a genre characterized by its violence to attract large numbers of viewers as compared with other types of program. Television industry measures of audience size are indicative of the last type of attraction.

So, is violence important or even essential to entertainment value in television programs? U.S. studies have directly examined whether the presence or absence of violence makes any difference to the audience size of programs or how much viewers enjoy programs. The level of violence in programs, as measured through content analysis, was found to be unrelated to their audience sizes (Diener & DeFour, 1978). In a more direct comparison, experiments were conducted in which groups of viewers evaluated violent and nonviolent versions of the same programs. Higher violence content did not result in viewers liking the programs more (Diener & DeFour, 1978; Diener & Woody, 1981). Unfortunately, violence was treated in generalized terms throughout this research. No attempt was made in any study to find out if program enjoyment was differentially linked to the presence or absence of specific types of violence.

In a subsequent experimental study with children, Potts, Huston, and Wright (1986) compared reactions to programs that systematically varied in the amount of violence and action they contained. Program enjoyment, as measured by visual attention to the screen, was not significantly related to whether or not violence was present.

Research conducted with a national television audience panel in Britain revealed that viewers' perceptions of violence were linked to their enjoyment of programs they had watched. In fact, perceiving a program to contain violence was associated with lower appreciation of it, especially among women viewers. This finding was found to occur across a number of drama series on British television. In the case of one crime drama series, however, viewers' perception that it contained justified violence used by good guys in measured response to provocation enhanced their appreciation of the program. Men's and women's viewing enjoyment, however, indicated that a program should have many twists and turns of plot (Woerter, 1997).

Advance knowledge that a program might contain violence may attract viewers who enjoy viewing violence. Herman and Leyens (1977) examined adult viewing patterns for televised movies on Belgian television over a 4-year period. Participants were members of a viewing panel who, every 15 minutes, noted which program they were watching and
how much they liked each program. Belgian television regularly broadcasts advisories about films in order to alert the public to programs containing violent or sexual material. Results showed that panel members liked films with and without advisories equally well. However, films that carried advisories attracted larger audiences. Unfortunately, no controls were employed for other content or thematic factors that may have influenced movie preferences.

Hamilton (1998) examined the impact of viewer discretion warnings on viewing levels for prime-time movies broadcast between September 1987 and September 1993. Hamilton found that descriptions in TV Guide that involved murder or family crime themes were significant positive predictors of a movie's overall audience size. In contrast, TV Guide descriptions involving the theme of murder were a significant negative predictor of audience levels among children from age 2 to 11 and teens from age 12 to 17. However, such audience ratings data do not make it clear if children or their parents were responsible for limiting viewing by children.

Other research with television ratings data has indicated that genres vary in their popularity and certain types of programs regularly attract bigger audiences than others. In the United States, many programs most watched by children, which are intended for younger audiences, contain fast-paced action and violence, often in cartoon form. Of programs targeted at the general family audience, situation comedies tend to attract the largest numbers of child viewers (Stipp, 1995). Once again, it is difficult to ascertain from television ratings data alone whether the large child audiences reflect selectiveness on the part of children themselves or whether program choices are being made for them by parents.

**INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTRACTION TO TV VIOLENCE**

Viewers have long been known to exhibit varying reactions to violence, whether presented within drama and entertainment or in the news (Gunter, 1985; Gunter & Woer, 1988). Some viewers are attracted by violence, others are repelled by it. Women are turned off by violence, and men enjoy watching programs with tense moments (Woer, 1997). Is violence an essential ingredient of good drama and entertainment? Can its use be justified on this basis? Are correlational relations between people's reported exposure to media violence and measures of their personal aggressiveness merely indicative of a preference for violent entertainment that is motivated by an assertive, dominant personality?

The appeal of violent entertainment is more pronounced among certain personality types (Atkin, Greenberg, Korzenny, & McDermott, 1979; Friedman & R. L. Johnson, 1972; Krcmar & Greene, 1999; Robinson & Bachman, 1972; Weaver, 1991). It can also have greater temporary appeal among individuals who might not otherwise exhibit a
preference for it, for example, as a means of coping with environmental threat (Boyanowsky, 1977; Boyanowsky, Newtson, & Walster, 1974).

Elsewhere evidence has emerged that violence is enjoyed and sought after by some sections of the audience. Research with sibling pairs has indicated that although they may exhibit similar viewing patterns, despite differing in their individual aggressiveness, the more aggressive siblings generally enjoyed violent entertainment more (Lynn, Hampson, & Agahi, 1989). Research from Spain indicated that enjoyment of cartoon violence among teenagers is most pronounced among those with sensation seeking, impulsive, and more aggressive personalities. Such individuals were also more likely to have reported viewing violent movies (e.g., Rambo, Robocop, Lethal Weapon, Universal Soldier) and to perceive them as less violent (Aluja-Fabregat & Torrubia-Beltri, 1998). There may be various reasons for these individual differences in viewing preferences.

One explanation for the enjoyment of screen violence is that it is exciting and therefore arousing. Such arousal can be pleasurable in its own right (Zillmann, 1978). Extending this arousal notion, the excitement may be wrapped up with fear. Although a fear response itself is unpleasant, relief from that fear is pleasant. Thus, evoking fear under controlled circumstances can give rise to pleasure once the fear has been overcome. Hence, viewers may choose to watch frightening movies to test themselves and because the sense of achievement from facing up to a fear or the sense of relief once the cause of the fear has gone away represent an intrinsic part of the entertainment experience (Blumer, 1933; Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Wilson, Hoffner, & Cantor, 1987; Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986).

The entertainment value of violent drama on television may also stem from its role in reinforcing viewers' values, beliefs, and attitudes. For example, reality-based crime programs have been found to hold especially strong appeal for young people who hold punitive attitudes and display authoritarian personality profiles. Such programs frequently presented criminals being caught and punished and as coming off worse in violent altercations with the police. Such themes were enjoyed by individuals who believed in severe punishment for offenders (Oliver & Armstrong, 1995). This belief reinforcement effect was also supported by findings that showed people with strong just world beliefs were among the most regular viewers of crime-drama programs. Such programs were dominated by themes whereby justice prevailed and the bad guy was caught and punished in the end. This story line confirmed the belief that the world is a just place (Gunter & Wober, 1983).

In summary, there is mixed evidence concerning whether or not violence in programs is a critical feature that enhances their overall popularity among audiences. Basic ratings data have revealed that programs with violence often are among the most watched programs on television. What these data do not reveal, however, is whether it is the violence per se that is the key driving factor behind program popularity or
whether there are other factors at play, within the programs themselves, in relation to when they are scheduled, or in the social context that viewing takes place. Attempts to experimentally manipulate the violence in programs have provided little evidence that greater violence leads to higher ratings. Yet, there is evidence indicating a preference for violent entertainment among certain sections of the audience, defined by their personality type or current mood state. Viewers may enjoy being aroused by screen violence as an experience in itself. In addition, for some viewers, scenes of violence in which bad guys must face the consequences for their misdeed may offer some reassurance that the world is really a just and safe place. Unfortunately, research into the appreciation of screen violence has provided few insights that would fit nicely into a taxonomy of violence that has meaning or significance for viewers.

CONCLUSIONS

The debate about television violence has a long history spanning as many years as the medium itself. The portrayal of violence in drama is widely established as a natural element of storytelling, and the reporting of violence in the news is recognized as a fact of life. Yet, public concern about violence on television has been persistently raised by critics and lobbyists who regard it as undesirable and a contributing cause of social ills. In response to this public pressure and in recognition of the power of the medium for which they are responsible, broadcasters have embraced these concerns in codes of practice and guidelines for program makers that draw attention to the need for care when depicting or reporting on violence. These codes are sensitive to types of effect on viewers that have been associated with violent portrayals and to public opinion about whether specific types of portrayal are regarded as acceptable or unacceptable.

A common accusation is that television contains too much violence. This is a matter of opinion rather than of fact. Nevertheless, it begs the question of how much violence television does indeed transmit and about the extent to which it permeates the television schedules. Systematic studies of television output have been mounted over the past 50 years in an attempt to provide hard evidence on this subject (e.g., Gerbner & Gross, 1976; McCann & Sheehan, 1985; National Television Violence Study, 1997, 1998; Remmers, 1954; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961; Shaw & Newell, 1972; Smythe, 1954; Williams, Zabrack, & Joy, 1982). Such research has indicated that television is permeated by violence, significant proportions of programs contain violence, and some violence-containing programs present substantial numbers of violent incidents.

What this all means in terms of the way audiences might respond and for broadcast policymakers and regulators is less clear. Much of the
early content analysis research focused on the production of objective counts of violent incidents. Such data were descriptive in nature and indicated how much violence occurred with selected program samples within a fairly narrow definition of violence. It was unclear whether such counts of violent acts were meaningful in that they represented a barometer of the levels of program attributes that were significant in relation to viewers' evaluations of programs or other psychological reactions to them. This problem has been increasingly recognized by researchers who have begun to adopt more sophisticated methods of violence definition and program coding that take into account what is known about audience response to different types of televised violence (*National Television Violence Study*, 1997, 1998; Potter, 1999; Potter & Smith, 1999).

The next chapter turns to methodological issues in more detail. In addition to providing details about the methodology used in the study discussed herein, wider issues related to the investigation of violent content on television are examined.
A fundamental question about violence on television concerns how much of it is shown. To answer, the usual approach has been to employ a counting procedure through which specified on-screen incidents and events, and the characters involved in them, are enumerated. This methodology yields a content analysis of programs producing a primarily quantitative assessment of violence. Content analysis is a descriptive methodology and, as such, does not measure audience reactions or program effects. Nevertheless, some content analysis research is used as a basis for media effects research in areas of inquiry such as agenda-setting or cultivation analysis (Rogers & Dearing, 1988; Signorielli, 1990). Furthermore, content analysis research can itself be informed by audience research concerned with public reactions to programs or the psychological effects of viewing certain types of portrayal. Such research may offer insights into the classification of content, thus providing an enhanced form of content analysis sensitive to the way viewers respond to television (Gunter, 1985; Kunkel et al., 1995).

The quantitative nature of content analysis means that much emphasis has been placed on what it reveals about the amount of violence on television. Over the years, however, estimates of how much violence is shown on television have varied widely from one study to another. In some cases, these variations result from the studies being conducted in different countries where the overall amount and range of television programs and the compositions of television schedules differ in marked degrees. In other instances, inconsistent research findings have arisen because of methodological differences between studies. Thus, studies within the same country have produced different results because they have used different definitions of violence, different program samples, and different ways of quantifying violence.
When conducting content analysis research on television violence, therefore, there are several issues of measurement and analysis that need to be considered. Researchers have to make decisions about the definition of violence on which all coding will be based, the units of analysis that will be applied, the sampling of content to be analyzed, the analysis of the attributes of violence, and the assessment of reliability of the analysis.

DEFINING VIOLENCE

The definition of violence is a key factor in any research on media violence. This is especially true in relation to the analysis of the representation of violence on screen. There are many different definitions of violence. Thus, the amount of violence that might be present in a television program may depend on what the viewer regards as violent in the first place. More restrictive definitions of violence will produce lower counts of violent incidents, whereas broader definitions will produce higher counts for the same media output.

Psychological Perspectives on Aggression

Various definitions of violence have derived from scholarly investigations of the subject. Early psychological definitions of aggression defined it as a behavior designed to cause injury to another organism. The intention to cause injury was regarded as a key factor (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, & Sears, 1939). Later developments in the theory of aggression encompassed behavior that not only caused injury to another person or living creature, but also resulted in the destruction of property (Bandura, 1973). Furthermore, whether an act that caused harm to another person could be construed as being “aggressive” depended on the nature, context, and purpose of the action. Thus, a dentist carrying out repairs on a patient’s teeth might cause that individual pain and may, indeed, need to inflict “injury” as part of the treatment. Such socially sanctioned activity would not normally be defined as “aggression” or “violence”. However, should the same dentist use a drill as an instrument of torture to inflict pain on a victim for purely selfish, sadistic purposes or to coerce the victim into a course of action against their will, such behavior would be construed as “violent.”

The intention to cause injury has repeatedly been a central feature of psychological definitions of aggression. Some definitions have focused on purely physical harm, but some writers have also included psychological or symbolic harm as a defining aspect of aggression (Berkowitz, 1993). Indeed, some theoreticians have produced taxonomies of actions in broadening the overall concept of aggression. In some cases, attention has centered on the perpetrator of the violence. For example, Berkowitz (1994) proposed four dimensions for categorizing aggression: (a) in-
strumenetal versus emotional acts (acts done for purposes of coercion or the establishment of power are instrumental, whereas those intended primarily to inflict harm are emotional), (b) physical versus verbal acts, (c) indirect versus direct attacks on a target, and (d) controlled or premeditated versus impulsive acts. Other researchers have examined violence from the perspective of the target or victim. Muncer, Gorman, and A. Campbell (1986) asked groups of prison inmates and college students to group together violent acts into types. Three principal dimensions appeared to dominate the groupings: physical versus verbal forms of aggression, violence between strangers versus violence between acquaintances, and provoked versus unprovoked violence.

Galtung (1975) offered a broad definition of violence as a phenomenon that is “present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realisations are below their potential realisations” (p. 111). Galtung distinguished five dimensions of violence. The most significant was structural (or indirect) as compared to personal (or direct) violence. Structural violence was defined in terms of states of injustice in the social system, where no concrete actor is discernible. Acts of personal violence were those in which the cause of the violence could be directly attributed to a concrete human being. Other distinctions were then made between physical and psychological violence; violence with or without an object (that suffers); the manifest or latent aspect of violence (i.e., is the violence directly observable?); and the degree of intention with which the violent act is committed (intended or unintended). According to Galtung, these dichotomised dimensions could be used in any combination leading to a typology with 32 different categories of violence.

Content Analysis Perspectives on Aggression

A variety of definitions of violence have been drawn up by media researchers in studying violence on television. Perhaps the most utilized definition of violence was developed by Gerbner and was used in research spanning more than 20 years (Gerbner, 1972; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner et al., 1994). This single, normative definition envisaged violence as: “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). This definition was also used by researchers who analyzed violence on television in Australia (McCann & Sheehan, 1985), Britain (Halloran & Croll, 1972), Japan (Iwao, de Sola Pool, & Hagiwara, 1981), and New Zealand (Haines, 1983). Accidental violence is included and the definition of violence is applied in the same way regardless of context. For Gerbner, this normative approach was appropriate because it was the prevalence of violence that was regarded as the main source of harmful effects.
Other research used Gerbner’s definition as a basis, but then added further features. A Canadian study reported by Williams, Zabrack, and Joy (1982) enhanced it with the specifications that it “must be plausible and credible; no idle threats, verbal abuse, or comic gestures with no credible violent consequences. May be intentional or accidental; violent accidents, catastrophes, acts of nature are included” (p. 366).

Alternative definitions of violence for content analysis purposes broadened out the definition of violence and tried to specify in more detail the kinds of incidents to be counted. In another U.S.-based study of television violence, violence was defined as “that which is psychologically or physically injurious to another person or persons whether intended or not, and whether successful or not” (Greenberg, Edison, Korzenny, Fernandez-Collado, & Atkin, 1980, p. 102). These researchers started with Gerbner’s definition, but expanded their focus because they wanted “to examine a fuller range of negative social behaviors available from television. A variety of noxious behaviors other than violence is available on television” (p. 102). In their definition, they delineated four major components: physical aggression, verbal aggression, theft, and deceit. They chose these negative behaviors because they were “considered as modelable by social learning theorists and child psychologists” (p. 102). This broader perspective influenced a number of later studies (J. D. Brown & K. Campbell, 1986; S. L. Kaplan & Baxter, 1982; Oliver, 1994; Potter & Vaughan, 1997; Potter et al., 1995; Potter & Ware, 1987).

Within the physical aggression category, Greenberg and his colleagues began with Gerbner’s definition but expanded it beyond attacks (with and without weapons) and included physical control or restraint of others, physical invasion of privacy, and elaborated fighting (e.g., fistfights among multiple people in which individual acts are indistinguishable). They added verbal aggression (verbal hostility, verbal rejection, and verbal threats) along with deceit and theft because these behaviors were also considered disruptive of society, and they provided models of behavior for viewers.

Potter and his colleagues (1995) defined violence as “any action that serves to diminish in some physical, social, or emotional manner” (p. 497). This definition included “a wide range of portrayals as suggested by Berkowitz’s conception. We include verbal forms of aggression, not just physical forms. We include psychological and emotional harm to the victim, not just physical harm. We include indirect as well as direct attacks. And we include impulsive or non-premeditated acts of aggression” (p. 497). The receiver of the aggression could be another person, the perpetrators, or a nonhuman entity such as an animal, an inanimate object, or society in general.

Potter and Vaughan (1997) replicated the study of Greenberg and his colleagues (1980) to find out if rates of different types of violence had changed from the mid-1970s to mid-1990s. They found that overall rates of physical violence stayed the same (12.7 vs. 12.3 acts per of violence per hour), but rates of verbal violence had climbed (from 22.3 to 27.0 acts per