Editorial

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 whenever a new entertainment medium appears on the scene that appeals to the masses. Such reactions were reported with the appearance of popular romantic and adventure novels in the nineteenth century and were repeated in response to the growing popularity of motion pictures in the early part of the present century.

In research there are a number of historical milestones spanning about sixty years. These deal respectively with concern about violence in the cinema, violence or horror on the radio, violence in comics and finally violence on television.

VIOLENCE IN THE MOVIES

The modern day story of concern about TV violence and of a coordinated social scientific research effort into its effects, begins in the 1920s, in the United States. This was the decade during which 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 center 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 people. One interesting fact 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, crime and sex.

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. Increasing 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 to properly investigate. For one thing, statistics were introduced to social science research, which facilitated a more scientific approach to opinion research. Armed with these new

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 assessing 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. Studies of movies' influences on delinquency suggested however 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 behavior; nevertheless the findings caused quite a stir.

VIOLENCE ON THE RADIO

A few years after the Payne Fund studies reported, another stir was caused by an incident that occurred on radio. On October 30, 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. And, 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 and 9 p.m. The introduction by Welles was very realistic in regard to the timeframe 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 program 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 program that the events they were about to hear were fictional. Many people, missing this information and the context it provided, therefore, thought they were listening to an authentic news bulletin.

HORROR COMICS

In the 1950s, attention switched to another popular 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 catalogues 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) since a large component of the comic diet consisted of crime, violence, horror and sex;
- (3) children who read the comics were necessarily stimulated to the performance of delinquent acts, cruelty, violence and undesirable social behavior.

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. And 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, so as to give rise to more questions than answers.

VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION

Television came under closer scrutiny during the 1960s. 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 concerns 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 hot on the heels of this report, came another large U.S. investigation, on this occasion concerned specifically with television's effects on social behavior. The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior was set up in 1969 to investigate the effects of television violence on children's attitudes and behavior.

Controversy surrounded this research program before it got underway, however, because TV network representatives on the committee blackballed seven leading social scientists distinguished for their past research and expertise on the subject of TV violence.

Further arguments followed the publication of the five-volume report and summary document 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 TV entertainment increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior among viewers.

THE MAJOR ISSUES

What are the major questions for discussion? The foregoing review has served not only to lend an important historical perspective to discussion of the portrayal of violence on television, but has also identified several major issues that regularly arise in public debate over the responsibilities of broadcasters. These include:

1. violence on television;
2. public perceptions of television violence;
3. exposure to violence on television;
4. the effects of television violence.

These issues are each addressed by the articles in this special edition.

MEASURING VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION

Turning first of all to the measurement of television violence, which is a problem of assessing how violent television programs are, the most common method used is known as *content analysis*. It has a number of fundamental characteristics and problems, however.

When measuring violence on television, researchers using content analysis begin by setting up an "objective" statement of what *they* mean by violence. This is the definition they will give to their program monitors who will actually watch the

programs and count up incidents that match that definition. This enables the researcher to produce a quantitative assessment of the “amount” of violence on television in terms of the numbers of violent incidents or events catalogued by the monitors.

The major problem with this approach is that all violence tends to be treated in the same way regardless of the type of program in which it occurs. Thus, cartoon violence, for example, is regarded as being no less violent than violence occurring in crime data series. The intensity of violence in a program is defined in terms of the numbers of certain kinds of incidents it contains, rather than in terms of the nature of those incidents.

Another problem, which is connected with the first, is that the definition of violence used by researchers often may not represent what viewers perceive to be violence. Thus, if a cartoon contains 20 incidents of violence according to a predetermined category, and a serious contemporary drama contains only five, the cartoon is regarded as more violent. Viewers, however, bring a different perspective with them to the TV screen.

The first article, by Cumberbatch, Jones and Lee, presents the results of a content analysis of violence on the four UK broadcast channels (BBC1, BBC2, ITV and Channel Four). In their review of research from different parts of world, these authors find that it is not always easy to draw comparisons, because different studies have employed different definitions of violence. Their own investigation was designed to facilitate comparisons both with work done in the United States and with early UK research. Cumberbatch and his colleagues report that the rate of violence in British television is lower than that reported for the major American networks and that there is some evidence of a decline compared with violence levels in the early 1970s.

MEASURING PERCEPTIONS OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE

An alternative approach to classifying television violence is to find out from viewers themselves what they perceive or define as violence. This perspective does not treat violence as a single unitary entity. In other words, it accepts that violence can come in many different forms and with different outcomes. It takes into account what the audience thinks about TV violence.

It also examines the extent and ways in which viewers agree or disagree about TV violence. Some viewers see more violence than others do in programs, and react more strongly to particular portrayals of violence.

Audience reactions are connected with the psychological characteristics of viewers and it is important to know if there are particular kinds of viewers who are likely to be especially upset or disturbed by certain forms of violence on television.

Despite all of these complexities, the audience perceptions approach can nevertheless provide useful recommendations for the classification of programs in terms of the violence they contain. Most importantly, however, this classification will take into account what viewers actually think or feel about violence, and so is more likely to be able to identify scenes likely to cause unfavorable reactions.

The second article, by Gunter, emphasizes the importance of studying viewers' perceptions of television violence. Content analysis is not dismissed as a useful technique; indeed, it is seen as essential to have some form of direct assessment of the content that appears on screen. Gunter calls for a marriage between two perspectives and suggests that coding frameworks upon which content classifications and qualifications are built should be guided by audiences' perceptions of programs.

MEASURING EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION

One of the principal concerns about violence on television stems from the belief that continued exposure to such material over long periods of time can blunt audience sensitivities to violence not only as it is shown on screen, but through a process of generalization, to its occurrence in real life. Attempts empirically to demonstrate this kind of effect, however, have often relied upon crude measures of television viewing behavior which for the most part can be seriously challenged as having dubious validity. Sensationalized stories in the press frequently give the impression that children watch large quantities of television violence and that it naturally follows that they are adversely affected by it. The facts about television viewing, however, reveal a different picture. In the third article, Mallory Wober discusses some detailed measurements of children's and teenagers' viewing behaviors and dispels some of the myths about the extent to which young viewers supposedly watch violence-containing programs. Such programs actually make up only a small proportion of the average youngster's total television diet, though there are exceptional cases who watch more. The paper also examines viewing patterns within a psychological framework and seeks to identify particular personality characteristics and attitudinal profiles of young viewers that have some relationship to their patterns of television watching.

THE EFFECTS OF TV VIOLENCE

Ultimately, concerns about television violence rest on the supposed harmful effects it may have on viewers, particularly on the young and impressionable. There have been many studies of the influence of television violence but these can be condensed down to a handful of basic research methods—laboratory experiments, field experiments, correlational surveys and longitudinal panel studies. Another way of dividing up the research in this field is in terms of the kinds of effects being measured. Research has explored the impact of television violence at cognitive, affective and behavioral levels. This special issue includes two articles that report research results on the effects of television violence. The first reports on laboratory experimental work that investigated children's affective (fright) response to violent and horrific film or television program content. The second is concerned with correlational and longitudinal panel studies of the behavioral effects of television violence.

Cantor and Wilson summarize the results of a research project on developing strategies for helping children deal with their fright reactions to scary media content. They found that a range of "cognitive" and "non-cognitive" strategies proved effec-

tive in enabling young viewers, aged between 3 and 11 years, to deal with frightening television depictions. While laboratory experiments are designed to demonstrate a direct cause-effect relationship between watching a violent event on television and an emotional or behavioral response on the part of the viewer, typically these studies test only small, unrepresentative groups of people under highly contrived, unnatural viewing conditions. The conditions that prevail in the laboratory setting tend to be so far removed from normal everyday reality, that, according to some critics, any findings about the causes of social behavior they produce may have little generalizability to the real world. Some researchers have attempted to circumvent these problems by studying relationships between television viewing and audience response in natural environments.

In the last article, Stipp and Milavsky review research that has studied the effect of actually televised entertainment programs on aggressive behavior of children and adolescents. They argue that there is little research on the possible impact of television violence on aggressive behavior obtained under realistic conditions. Previous reviews of research are criticized for their heavy reliance on experimental evidence that may have little relevance to the real world, for overstating the power of surveys to provide causal evidence, failure to distinguish properly between attitudinal effects and behavioral effects, insufficient consideration of panel studies and a tendency to draw conclusions of serious antisocial effects on the basis of research findings that show only weak statistical relationships between watching television violence and aggressive tendencies among viewers.

The debate about television violence continues both in the public and academic spheres. The question of whether or not there is too much violence on the small screen is a subjective one as much as it is a scientific one; the answer lies to a large extent in prevailing public taste and opinions. Values change constantly, and are reflected in what is deemed to be acceptable viewing fare. On the question of whether or not television violence has any direct effects on viewers, the answer is neither simple nor straightforward. Much depends on the type of effect to which reference is being made and on the method used to measure television's impact. From the range of research reported in this special issue, it is apparent that the measurement of television effects, and of factors that mediate those effects, is highly complex. Often, researchers have relied upon methodologies that inadequately represent real world television viewing experiences and upon conceptual frameworks that omit important contributory variables. Although some progress has been made in elucidating the nature of certain types of television influence, we are still a long way from demonstrating conclusively the extent and character of television's influence on the development of antisocial attitudes and behavior.

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