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Attitudes About Sex and Violence on Television in the United States and in Great Britain: A Comparison of Research Findings

1. Research Findings From Great Britain

From the earliest days of television there has been concern about the portrayal of violence and sexual material in programs. Politicians and professional lobbyists have derived considerable political mileage and publicity from attacking television. At the same time, the press, for long media rivals of television, have eagerly devoted extensive coverage to controversy over the depiction of violent and explicitly sexual material on the small screen.

The prevailing understanding is that the public generally believe that there is too much violence on television. An accompanying "common sense" notion is that televised violence is potentially harmful, especially where young viewers are concerned. Critics frequently point to the considerable body of published social scientific evidence which purportedly proves a causal link between violence on the screen and the development of aggressive dispositions or incitement to violence of those who watch it. Similar opinions have been voiced about sex on television.

The fact is that there is still considerable disagreement among the experts about the existence of links between the portrayal of violence or sex on screen and aggressive or sexual behavior among viewers, and it may be a long time yet before a consensus of opinion is reached among researchers. It is *not* our aim to attempt to reconcile opposing scientific views about the effects of controversial television content in this paper. There is another level of concern, however, which relates not so much to television's effects, but to matters of public taste about television content which underpins calls to control what programs may depict. Public opinion about television has also received widespread press attention. As political ammunition, this kind of evidence has carried as much weight as research about the effects of television. Sadly, there has been frequent misrepresentation and misinterpretation of opinion poll data in public statements that have been made about the nature and extent of public concern about violent or sexual material on television.

We agree that it is important to take the opinions of viewers into account in any debate about sex or violence on television. All too often, viewers' impressions and attitudes are played down or ignored altogether. It is equally unfortunate, however, that when public attitudes are aired, they tend to be oversimplified. The issues surrounding the rightness or wrongness of showing sex and violence on

television are complex. As research discussed in this paper reveals, the public's views can vary greatly and are not all weighted in one direction. Much depends on how questions about televised sex and violence are asked, and whether or not they refer to general or specific areas of television output. It is easy to obtain an impression of strong concern, by using a particular line of probing public opinion. By focusing upon more specific aspects of the viewing experience, however, most notably the programs which viewers watch, results are quite different.

1.1 Research on Public Opinion about TV Content in Great Britain

How widespread then are public concerns about violence and sex on television. We begin by examining evidence from the UK on public feelings about television violence, in a fairly general sense. Is violence on television a source of offence to viewers? Opinion polls commissioned and published by major newspapers in the UK have frequently given the clear impression that there is widespread public concern.

At the beginning of November 1985, for example, the *Daily Telegraph* (a national daily newspaper in the UK) published results from a national Gallup Poll which showed that 60 percent of people agreed with the statement "There is too much violence in TV entertainment shows". In a further Gallup Poll, results published by the same newspaper in September 1987 revealed that 56 percent of a national survey sample agreed that "there is too much violence on television".

While this may seem to be damning evidence, and indeed has been corroborated by the television industry's own polls, as we will see later, the problem with this kind of approach is that it focuses viewers' attention acutely on a generic concept of violence alone and does not get to grips with the significance of violence for them in the context of all other aspects of television which influence their responses to what they watch.

An alternative way of finding out about public concerns regarding depictions of violence or sex on television is to examine the extent to which either term is mentioned by viewers as sources of offence. This approach focuses on the *salience* of violence and sex on television. In keeping with the requirements of broadcasting legislation in the United Kingdom, commercial television companies are required to ensure, as far as possible, that nothing is broadcast which offends against taste and decency, or which is likely to be offensive to public feeling. The Independent Television Commission in succeeding the Independent Broadcasting Authority, is charged with monitoring the performance of licensed commercial television companies in this way. Part of the job involves surveying public opinion. One of the lines of questioning used has therefore involved asking viewers if they have experienced anything offensive on their television screens in the past year, and if so to state what was the cause of that offence. Other lines of questioning have probed opinion about what is acceptable and unacceptable on television, and still others have examined direct measures of attitudes about specific areas of content

Table 1: U.K.: Examples of Things Found Offensive on TV (4%+)

	All findings anything offensive	As % of all respondents
Base:	678	(1195)
	%	%
Violence	53	30
Bad language	50	29
Actual depiction of sexual matters	26	15
Mention of sexual matters	20	11
Smutty/crude jokes	18	10
Biased/Unfair programmes	12	7
Racist jokes	9	5
Factual programmes about war/famine/news items	7	4
Religious jokes	6	4
Other types of comedy	4	2
Other	11	6

Source (Tables 1 through 5): Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), London, England, 1988.

or particular programs. It is interesting to compare the occurrence of concern about sex and violence when these different kinds of questioning are used.

In a survey conducted with a national UK sample in 1988 which investigated public attitudes towards a variety of taste and decency issues connected with television programming, the prevalence of concern about sex and violence varied markedly with the form of the question.

1.2 Sources of Offense

First, we will consider opinions about violence and sex in the context of perceived sources of offense. Respondents were initially asked whether they had personally seen or heard things on television which *they had found offensive*. In the 1988 survey, more than half (57% of the sample of nearly 1200 UK-wide respondents claimed that they had been offended by something, while just over four in ten (43%) claimed that they had not.

Respondents were next asked, if they had been offended, to give examples of the kinds of things that had caused the offence. Half or more of those who claimed to have been offended named violence or bad language as the sources of offense while somewhat under half mentioned sexual content.

In representing these perceptions among the full sample, the results can be displayed in terms of percentages of the sample as whole who claimed to have been offended by violence or sex, etc. On doing this, it emerged that just under one in three respondents (30%) reported offense caused by violence on television and a similar proportion mentioned offence caused by sexual material (29%).

Next, an alternative question was used which provided a different frame of ref-

Table 2: U.K.: Items Wouldn't Like to See on TV

	Items wouldn't like to see	Found offensive
Base: All respondents	1195 %	(1195) %
Violence	27	
Sex/explicit sex scenes	18	25
Bad language/swearing	9	11
Factual scenes of people being killed/dying	7	22
Cruelty to animals/animals killing/attacking each other	3	3
Nudity (unspec)	2	-
Rape (unspec)	1	-
None of these/none	34	-

erence in which to elicit viewers' perceptions of violence and sex on television. Respondents were asked to name any items they *would not like to see* on television. Their comments focused primarily on violence (27%) and explicit sex scenes (18%). Bad language and swearing were mentioned by one in ten (9%), while some respondents also mentioned violence displayed in factual scenes of people being killed or dying (7%) and cruelty to animals or animals killing or attacking each other (3%). In Table 2, these results are presented alongside those for items named as sources of offence. The same three items feature at the top of each list, but except for violence, are named to a different extent in each case. Explicit sex scenes, for example, were more often identified as something that viewers would not like to see on television than as something which had been a cause of offence to them. Moving on, respondents in the same survey were also asked which items in their opinion *should never be shown* on television. In this case, almost half the sample (48%) made some mention, with comments focusing again on violence, brutality or cruelty (16%) and explicit sex scenes (14%), followed by factual scenes of people being killed or dying (5%), child abuse (5%) and bad language (4%).

In Table 3, comparisons are made between items named in response to all three questions. The first pattern to emerge is that progressively fewer respondents mentioned any items at all as the frame of reference became more severe. In respect of violence on television, far fewer respondents took the view that it should never be shown compared with the number who said they either would not (personally) like to see violence on television or who claimed to have been offended by it. Responses mentioning sexual material were clearly less frequently occurring in the context of sources of offence that in connection with things respondents said they would not like to see or which should never be shown.

The above questions required respondents to supply their own answers. What happens to viewers' opinions when answers are already supplied and they have to choose from items presented to them? The UK survey probed further for the kinds of things respondents would not want to see on television or which they believed should not be shown by using questions with ready-made response

Table 3: U.K.: Items Which Should Never be Shown

	Items should	would not	Found
	never be shown	like to see	offensive
Base: all respondents	1195 %	1195 %	1195 %
Violence/brutality/cruelty	16	27	25
Explicit scenes of lovemaking/sex scenes	14	18	11
Factual scenes of people being killed/dying	5	7	3
Child Abuse	5	-	-
Bad language	4	9	22
Nudity	1	2	-
None/not stated	52	34	11

* Less than 1 %.

options. In the case of each question, a list of items was presented to respondents and they were asked to choose any which in the first instance represented items they personally would not want to see on television, and secondly, items which they believed should never be shown on television.

Table 4 shows the extent to which each listed item was selected by respondents as something they would not want to see. These results are then compared with self-generated items for the same question. Rape, explicit sex, certain forms of violence and bad language were the most often selected items. Three points are of special interest here. First, more items were chosen from the items that had earlier been self-generated by respondents. Second, items that had earlier been self-generated by survey respondents, were selected by many more respondents from the prompt list.

Third, the rank order of items of concern from prompt list selections was different from that derived from self-generated choices. Thus, sexual material was more often chosen as the type of content respondents would not wish to see than

Table 4: U.K.: Items Would not Want to See on Television (Prompted)

Base: All respondents	1195 %	(1195)* %
A woman raped by a man/rape/unspec.	55	(-)
Explicit scenes of love-making	31	(18)
The killing of an innocent victim	29	(27)
Animals killing/attacking each other/cruelty to animals	28	(3)
Bad language	26	(9)
Frontal male nudity	16	(-)
The killing of a criminal	14	(27)
Frontal Female nudity	13	(-)
Close-up of child-birth	9	(-)
Nudity (unspec)	5	(2)

* Unprompted answers to question about items viewers would not like to see on TV.

Table 5: U.K.: Item Which Should not Ever be Shown on Television

Base: All respondents	1195	(1195)*
	%	%
A woman raped by a man	60	(*)
Explicit scenes of love-making	36	(14)
The killing of an innocent victim	32	(16)
Animals killing/attacking each other	27	(-)
Bad language	25	(4)
Frontal male nudity	23	(1)
Frontal female nudity	21	(1)
The killing of a criminal	20	(16)
Close-up of child-birth	12	(*)

* Unprompted answers to question about items which should never be shown on TV.

violent items when a list of options was provided to respondents, while violence was more often mentioned than sex when respondents had to supply their own answers.

A similar comparison was made between item mentions and item choices in response to a question asking respondents to select items which should never be shown on television. Again, more respondents made a response of some sort, items were mentioned more often when chosen from a prompt list than when self-generated answers were required, and the rank order of items common to prompted and self-generated questions varied. Rape was once more the most often mentioned item from the prompt list, followed by explicit sex scenes. Concerns about violent material and bad language followed next, with the latter being mentioned a great deal more often when prompted (see Table 5).

1.3 General Opinions about TV Violence

The controversy surrounding the portrayal of violence on television embodies many different worries and questions related to the possible social effects on audiences and to decisions governing what is permitted on screen and under what circumstances. One accusation often leveled against broadcasters is that there is simply too much violence on television. When issued as a bland, unspecified statement, a typical finding, as we have observed already, is that most people will agree that there is too much. A survey conducted by the IBA in 1986, for instance, corroborated other press polls at around the same time, with six out of ten respondents stating their agreement.

We will see, however, that if we turn from this standard and very general question to the responses given to more focused questions about televised violence, a different level of response can emerge. For example, when asked, in a nationwide opinion survey, about the timing of violent programs, an overwhelming proportion of UK viewers held the opinion that such programs should be broadcast late at

Table 6: U.K.: General Opinions About Violence on TV

	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %
TV programmes containing violence should be broadcast late at night	80	12	8
There are too many programmes on television that contain violence	60	21	19
We would be better off without violence on television; there is already enough in real life	55	24	21
I sometimes wish that violence in programmes (like <i>The Sweeney</i>) was more realistic	15	22	63
People who say that television is harmful to people don't know what they're talking about	32	33	35

Source (Tables 6-10): IBA/BARB 1986

night. In addition to agreeing with the statement that "there is too much violence on television", more than half a national UK sample of viewers agreed that we would all be better off without violence on television. Relatively few respondents, however, wished to see violence in programs become more realistic and exhibited mixed views about whether it was a sign of good sense and awareness to believe that television is harmful to people (see Table 6).

1.4 Perceived Harms of TV Violence

Taking this question of the possible harms of television violence further, another national survey sample was presented with a group of items which dealt with purported harms and beneficial influences of television violence. Six items dealt with potential harms, five with a harmless role of violence, and one with possible benefits.

Nearly eight out of ten respondents felt that people are justified in being concerned about the impact of television violence on children today. At the same time, more than six out of ten believed that children will imitate violence seen on television, that television violence frightens through seeing it portrayed on television. Slightly smaller percentages of respondents believed that television violence can make children aggressive and that it is bad for children's sleep. In summary, when given direct prompts, most viewers believe that television violence may have potentially harmful effects on children, influencing their behavior and disturbing them emotionally.

On four out of five items which identified television violence as being, on balance, harmless, those who disagreed far outnumbered those who agreed with such sentiments. There were mixed feelings about whether seeing television violence once in a while can do children any real harm. The same proportion of

Table 7: U.K.: Television as Harmful, Harmless or Beneficial

	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %
<i>Harmful effects of TV violence</i>			
People are justified in being concerned about the impact of TV violence on children today	78	17	5
Children will imitate the violence they see on TV	64	22	14
Watching TV programmes containing violence often frightens children unnecessarily	63	20	17
If children often watch TV programmes containing violence they get accustomed to violence	61	25	14
By watching TV programmes containing violence children become aggressive	58	27	15
Watching programmes containing violence is bad for children's sleep	57	27	16
<i>Average</i>	64	22	14
<i>Harmlessness of TV violence</i>			
It can do no harm if children watch programmes containing violence once in a while	33	34	33
It can do no harm if children sometimes get a bit frightened from TV violence	23	22	55
Children forget violent programmes very quickly	19	32	49
Watching violence on TV has hardly any influence on children at all	11	15	74
<i>Average</i>	19	23	58
<i>Beneficial effects of TV violence</i>			
When children watch TV programmes containing violence, they get rid of some of their own aggression	9	33	58

respondents agreed and disagreed with this belief. However, respondents did not believe, on the whole that it can do no harm for children to be frightened by television violence, or that violence has no effect on children, or that they quickly forget about violent programs. Between one in two and three in four rejected the latter beliefs. Very few respondents indeed thought that children could discharge their own aggression through watching violence on television. There was very little public support for the notion of catharsis (see Table 7).

In sum, these data suggest strong concern about possible effects of TV violence on children. At the same time, the vast majority dismissed any suggestion that they themselves are made to feel violent by watching crime programs.

Table 8: U.K.: The Violence Issue in Perspective

	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %
The effects that TV violence can have on children are usually exaggerated by the newspapers	36	29	35
It is my opinion that the violence issue has been blown up out of all proportion	29	22	49

1.5 The Violence Issue in Perspective

There is no doubt that the public believe that television violence is an important issue. When we look carefully enough, however, we find that viewers are not swayed by everything they read in the papers, even though they harbor some genuine personal concerns. Around half of a UK-wide viewer sample did not think that the violence issue had been blown up out of proportion, perhaps reflecting earlier opinions about how serious an issue it was perceived to be. The remainder, however, either thought that it had been exaggerated or were not sure. Opinions were equally divided on whether newspapers usually exaggerate the effects television violence can have on children (see Table 8).

1.6 Violence in Programs

So far we have reflected on opinions given by viewers about violence on television in a broad sense, unrelated to any specific portrayals seen in programs. Viewers, however, watch programs and the style and content of the programs they watch can vary significantly. Do viewers' opinions about violence seen in specific programs reflect the level of concern apparently indicated by broader statements of opinion?

Important insights into this last question can be derived from a body of UK research which explored viewers' opinions about a range of UK-made and US-made crime drama series. In these surveys, viewers of each week's episode of the selected series were questioned in detail about their perceptions of any violence it may have contained. While the UK series may not be familiar to non-UK readers, the important point to note in the tables which follow is the degree of variation in response across programs in terms of the perceived amounts and types of violence they contain.

Perceptions of Violence in British Crime Series. This research assessed whether viewers felt that a program happened to be the most violent series on television, or whether they felt that there are many other more violent series, whether the violence shown on screen was always necessary to the story, and whether in

Table 9: Perceptions of Violence in UK Crime Series

	Bergerac	Juliet Bravo	Cats Eyes	The Bill	Dempsey and Makepeace
	%	%	%	%	%
There are many more violent programmes than ... on TV at the moment	93	95	87	84	84
From what I have seen, the violence on ... is often necessary to the story	66	74	62	74	60
... features too many extreme forms of violence for my liking	6	4	10	10	18

general a series contained too many extreme forms of violence for personal tastes. As Table 9 indicates, more than eight out of ten viewers of each series believed there were many more violent series on television than the one in question. This was felt to be the case most often for *Bergerac* and *Juliet Bravo*. More than six out of ten viewers of these series felt that from what they had seen the violence was often necessary to the story. More than seven out of ten thought this was true for *Juliet Bravo* and *The Bill*. Few respondents agreed that these series were far too violent for their liking. At least three times as many *Dempsey and Makepeace* viewers felt that the show was too violent as did viewers of *Bergerac* and *Juliet Bravo*.

Perceptions of Violence in US Crime Series. Crime drama series imported from the United States have been a prominent and popular part of the television schedules in the UK for many years. Some of these programs have been severely criticized, however, both in the USA and UK, for their violence content. Public anxieties in the UK have been sharpened particularly because these programs tend to attract many young viewers. In this research, attitudes were compared on three US crime drama series which were broadcast on British television at the time - *Knight Rider*, *Magnum PI* and *Murder She Wrote*.

As Table 10 shows, more than nine out of ten viewers of these series among a national sample of viewers, felt that there are many other more violent programs on television than each of these series. There is a logical paradox in these results; for not only does each particular judgement imply that a particular series is not so violent; but when other series are investigated none of them is acknowledged to be the location of greatest violence. It is known from other research that viewers do not generally patronize just one series, but watch several series within a genre, so it is unlikely that people are saying that 'other series' are more violent just because they are unfamiliar with them. It is more likely that the question is being treated simply as an assessment of the level of violence the series is felt to show and the answers are reasonably interpreted as implying that people do not consider any of the series to be unduly violent.

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Table 10: U.K.: Perceptions of Violence in US Crime Series

	Knight Rider %	Magnum %	Murder She Wrote %
There are many more violent programmes than ... on TV at the moment	91	93	93
From what I have seen, the violence on ... is often necessary to the story	58	60	49
... features too many extreme forms of violence for my liking	8	8	7

There was less widespread agreement over whether the violence shown in these series was always necessary to the story. Around six out of ten felt that this was true for *Knight Rider* and *Magnum*, while just under half felt that it was true of *Murder She Wrote*. Fewer than one in ten viewers of these programs felt that they were too violent for personal tastes.

1.7 Discussion

We have presented the findings from a number of nationwide surveys conducted in the United Kingdom in which opinions regarding the portrayal of violence and sex and TV have been investigated. Opinions were found to vary quite a lot with the types of questions being asked and with the types of content being asked about. This in itself is a very important finding. It shows that the public's concerns about such TV content can be effectively measured only by taking into account a wide range of opinions about the many different ways in which violence and sex can be portrayed on TV. But it also suggests that some questions might lead to erroneous conclusions and that the public's opinions are very complex.

There was widespread feeling, for instance, that parents should take greater control over what their children watch, particularly with regard to programs containing violence. Parents should, it is widely believed, steer their children clear of television violence for as long as possible. Many respondents in our surveys believed that children are often unable to distinguish when violence on television is real or make-believe. There was a widely held opinion too that television violence might give children the misleading impression that murder and mayhem are commonplace in real life. It is interesting though that many respondents felt that to remove violence from television altogether would present too rosy a picture of what the world is like. Thus, despite opinions indicating a level of concern about showing violence on television, members of the public are aware of an important role played by television in reflecting events that occur in reality and in showing the way the world really is. This perception is reflected in other opinions we obtained from our survey respondents which we mention again below.

Further, although respondents, when asked outright, tended to endorse the view that there is "too much violence on TV", the majority also rejected the opinion that violence should never be shown. Instead there is an acceptance of necessity to include violence sometimes, whether in fictional or factual programming, to tell a story or to get a point across. However, viewers do ask for limits to be placed on when such programs are broadcast and favor the idea of more information or guidance from broadcasters (in the form of warning symbols on screen and more detail about programs in television guides and newspapers) about the content of programs.

The research on opinions concerning fictional crime-drama series is particularly illuminating. It is important to ask viewers about television violence in the context of particular programs they have actually seen. In this way, they can base their opinions on concrete examples of violent portrayals involving characters and settings with which they have some degree of familiarity. When asking viewers for opinions about general concepts of violence on television, as is so typical of many surveys, one can never be sure how these opinions are formulated.

We noted widespread agreement with statements proposing that television contains excessive amounts of violence. In connection with particular television series, however, this sort of attitude was less commonplace. Characters who, within the context of particular storylines, have different motives or reasons for their aggressive actions. An important element likely to affect viewers' judgements about television violence therefore is the nature of the aggressor. In television crime series, conflicts usually revolve around the actions of law breakers and law-enforcers. We asked our respondents to give their opinions about both of these groups, with our main focus being on perceptions of portrayals of the police.

Our findings revealed that although sizable proportions of respondents perceived the use of violence by fictional police to be nearly always justified, the extent to which this opinion was held varied considerably across television series and was not always a majority opinion. However, in most cases, few respondents felt that fictional police were more violent than they needed to be nor were they perceived to be "trigger happy". Fictional portrayals of the police were generally not perceived by the majority to reflect the behavior of real life police. The portrayal of criminal behavior in contrast, was perceived by most viewers to be realistic.

General evaluations of UK crime series were, on the whole, positive. Storylines were perceived to contain variety and few respondents said they would be glad to see any of these series taken off the screen; and this opinion prevailed despite earlier reservations about the suitability of these programs for young viewers.

Finally, we continued our investigation of public opinion concerning the depictions of violence in selected television crime drama series, focusing this time on US productions. Just as we found with British series, perceptions of violence in US crime dramas did not reveal widespread concern. Although there were differences in opinions given about different series, on the whole, a majority of our respondents who had watched episodes from these series did not perceive them to be excessively violent. This judgement was further reflected in opinions about

the behavior of fictional police and law-enforcers in these programs. Although many respondents did not feel that the use of violence by fictional police was nearly always justified few felt that law-enforcers were overly violent either.

As with some British series, US productions were judged to be of questionable suitability for children who might, it was believed, take them seriously, but these programs were seen as suitable for family viewing by a majority of respondents who watched them. This suggests, once again, that viewers believe it is alright for children to watch these series, provided they do so in the company of their parents. On the whole, however, all these series were widely appreciated. In other words, while most viewers endorse general statements critical of TV violence, they express little criticism of the role and the amount of violence in specific programs.

2. U.S. Research and Comparison with British Data

When Americans discuss research regarding sex and violence on television, or research on most other topics, they focus on American research and usually pay very little attention to data from other parts of the world. The above data, therefore, provide a unique opportunity to illuminate American data, and our understanding of their meaning, by comparing them with findings from abroad. This is why I have chosen to present U.S. data on this topic in the context of a comparison between the two countries and to focus on similarities and differences between attitudes about TV sex and violence in the U.S. and in Great Britain.

2.1 The Public Debate

The similarities in the public debate in the two countries are striking. Barrie Gunter finds that the press in the U.K., as well as politicians and pressure groups, frequently deal with the issue and that the debate is based on the understanding that polls show large portions of the public to be very concerned. The very same thing could be said about the United States.

An additional similarity is the kind of survey evidence that is cited to support the notion of great public concern: In most polls, public opinion about sex on television, for example, is assessed through one question, such as "Do you think there is too much sex on television?" Sometimes, the question includes both sides, i.e. "agree" or "disagree". But an extensive Roper Poll search suggests that a question like "Do you think there is not enough sex on TV?" has never been asked in a poll.

One may argue that this does not represent a problem since, given right interpretation, even simplistic and one-sided poll questions can be useful and add to our knowledge - even on an issue which the British research clearly shows to

be a very complex one. However, public discussions on poll data about sex and violence on television largely ignore the complexity of this issue. In both countries, the polls - which show majorities agreeing to the "too much sex/violence?" question - are simply interpreted as showing that sex and violence on TV are important issues and major concerns and that viewers are dissatisfied with the level of sex and violence in the programs they watch. Rarely do discussions deal with contradictions between these poll results and other evidence, such as the large number of people (currently 62% of all households) who buy cable - which is known to show more explicit sex and violence than the over-the-air networks.

As in Great Britain, a large body of research on this topic has been accumulated by U.S. broadcast organizations. Broadcasters in both countries have to deal with regulatory requirements and respond to viewer complaints, and they also need to understand the public's taste in order to maximize their audience. In the U.K., there was (and is) at least as much emphasis on viewer complaints on the issue of TV violence as on the issue of sex on TV. In the U.S., however, public concern about sexual depictions appeared to have dominated the agenda and prompted broadcasters to concentrate on research on public response to sexual topics, language, and depictions, particularly during the last decade. (The U.S. television networks did conduct research on the effects of television violence during the seventies and they continue to monitor and edit all programs, and especially children's programs, for violent content; see Stipp and Milavsky 1988.)

2.2 Research on TV Content in the U.S.

The U.S. networks had always covered the potential problem of "offensive" program content in their internal program research. However, they decided to study viewer opinion on the sexual content of their programs in greater detail, starting during the 70's, in response to pressure from organized groups who approached first the networks and then advertisers. The protesters, primarily groups of Fundamentalist Christians, objected against language, depictions, and "messages" they deemed "immoral" and "unchristian". The networks initially felt that high ratings for the targeted programs - huge hits like *Dallas*, *Three is Company*, *Soap*, and *Saturday Night Live* - were evidence enough that the new, more liberal program standards reflected the changed standards of America during the time of the "sexual revolution". The networks' internal program research also failed to uncover any widespread misgivings about "offensive" program content. But that research was full of competitive information and remained highly guarded whereas the protest groups wrote letters and quoted the kind of poll data mentioned above.

To counteract the pressures from protest groups and from advertisers who did not want to be on a boycott list, ABC and NBC conducted special studies to assess viewer opinion in 1980 and 1981. Only one of the studies - an NBC sponsored Roper study - was published (*Journal of Advertising Research*, December 1981).

Protests against network programming and their impact on advertisers declined during the early 80's. The involved parties disagree on why this happened: protest groups claim that they forced the networks to reduce sexual content; the networks dispute that (Weiss, 1991; Stipp, 1991). However, there can be no disagreement that the protest movement returned in the late 80's with considerable strength and improved tactical skills: they went directly to the advertisers and threatened them with boycotts.

For their own understanding of the audience's true feelings, and to defend themselves against attacks, ABC and NBC conducted new research. ABC conducted a major study that explored viewer opinions on objectionable TV content. NBC replicated major parts of the study they sponsored in 1981. Another project, sponsored by NBC and conducted under the auspices of researchers at the University of California in Santa Barbara, has just been on display during the poster session this morning (Linz et al, 1991; Stipp, 1991).

2.3 Opinions about Program Content

A variety of studies, conducted over a 10 year span and using different methods, indicate that the issues of "violence on TV" and of "sex on TV" are much more complex than a simple "Is there too much ..." poll question suggests and that the answers to such questions are strongly affected by social desirability. The U.S. data clearly confirm the experience of the research in Great Britain: when asked about specific programs, viewer response is very different from the results obtained with abstract questions. Tables 11 to 16 present data from different U.S. studies which illustrate this.

Table 11 shows that, as in the U.K., a majority of Americans agree that there

Table 11: U.S.: Poll Response and Behavior/Attitude

<i>Poll Response</i>		
"Too Much Sex on TV"	Agree 52%	Disagree 43%
<i>Behavior/Attitude</i>		
	"Too Much Sex on TV"	
	YES (N = 518)	NO (N = 429)
Watch		
Law and Order	14%	12%
Equal Justice	12%	12%
L.A. Law	26%	30%
Rate Excellent		
Law and Order	17%	15%
Equal Justice	23%	21%
L.A. Law	40%	42%

Source: NBC 1991 Research, adults 18+, N = 1,000

Table 12: U.S.: Dislikes and Likes of Violence

	Dislike	Like in show:	
	Violence in Show %	Presence of Violence %	Absence of Violence %
Dallas	1	*	*
Three's Company	*	*	*
Soap	1	*	0
Saturday Night Live	*	0	0
Knots Landing	5	1	0
Flamingo Road	1	*	*
B.J. and the Bear	3	5	1
Love Boat	*	0	3
All my Children	*	*	0
Dukes of Hazzard	13	17	1
Harper Valley PTA	*	*	1
Vega\$	7	3	1
M*A*S*H	1	*	*
Happy Days	*	*	2
Little House on the Prairie	*	*	3

Source: Roper/NBC 1981 N = 1,222 adults 18+; based on respondents familiar with program; coded responses from open-ended questions.

is "too much sex on TV". But, more importantly, it shows that responses to that question are not related to viewing or evaluations of programs which regularly deal with sexual topics. It has been noted above that the British research showed this widely used question to be too simplistic and that it appears to violate basic rules of question wording (Rugg 1942; Riesman 1948; Payne 1950, 1951; Sudman 1974). These data indicate that responses to this question are not related to behavior, shedding further doubt on the validity and usefulness of information based on this kind of question.

The opinions about specific shows listed in Tables 12 and 13 are based on questions that ask respondents about "likes" and "dislikes" in programs without pointing to the issues of "sex" and "violence" directly. The idea was to find out which program elements are salient to people without mentioning anything that might prompt "socially desirable" answers. Note that "sex" and "violence" were mentioned as "dislikes" - as one would expect, but also as "likes". For example, "Love Boat" was praised for the presence and absence of sexual content, illustrating how different people view programs in different ways.

The data in Tables 14, 15, and 16 were obtained through questioning which is more similar to the approaches used in the British research on specific programs and they essentially replicate findings from the U.K. research we have just seen, even though most questions deal with sex instead of violence, and even though there were differences in method: The data show low levels of dissatisfaction when respondents are asked about specific programs, including programs which

Table 13: U.S.: Dislikes and Likes of Sex in Selected TV Programs

	Dislikes	Like in show:	
	Sex in Show %	Presence of Sex %	Absence of Sex %
Dallas	10	5	*
Three's Company	9	5	2
Soap	6	2	*
Saturday Night Live	6	1	*
Knots Landing	5	1	0
Flamingo Road	4	2	*
B.J. and the Bear	4	5	2
Love Boat	6	3	4
All my Children	2	1	*
Dukes of Hazzard	4	4	2
Harper Valley PTA	2	2	1
Vega\$	2	3	1
M*A*S*H	3	2	2
Happy Days	2	1	9
Little House	1	*	17

Source: Roper/NBC 1981 N = 1,222 adults 18+; based on respondents familiar with program; coded responses from open-ended questions.

critics have identified as objectionable. (The TV movies in Table 15 all dealt with "controversial" topics, including incest, adultery, etc; the movie in Table 16 dealt with date rape. It should be noted though that, in accordance with network television standards in the U.S., there was never any depiction of sexual acts, rape was not depicted, except aggression and violence leading up to it; there were some scenes of violence in most of the movies.)

2.4 Conclusions

Based on these U.S. data as well as the in many ways strikingly similar data from Great Britain, we conclude the following:

- One general poll question about TV content produces ambiguous results because it does not clearly address a specific aspect of the issue and is, therefore, open to misinterpretation and confusion by the respondent and by the user of the poll data. A question like "Is there too much violence on TV" is not only simplistic, it also appears to elicit socially desirable answers with no predictive value and no relationship to viewing behavior.
- Detailed questions reveal that opinion about "violence" and "sex" in television programs can be and should be measured in a specific manner. This is a complex issue and viewers have different views depending on which facet of the issue is under consideration. For example, viewers distinguish between language, depictions (i.e. nudity), and discussion of sexual topics. Opinions

Table 14: U.S.: Acceptability of „Sex“ in Selected Programs

Program	% Find Acceptable
Who's the Boss?	99
Starman	98
Moonlighting	96
MacGyver	96
Cheers	95
Growing Pains	95
Spenser: For Hire	95
Magnum, P.I.	95
The Equalizer	94
Designing Women	93
Golden Girls	93
Sledge Hammer	93
The A-Team	93
L.A. Law	92
Hotel	91
Hill Street Blues	90
Miami Vice	85
Knots Landing	82
The Colbys	81
Dynasty	78
Dallas	74
Average	91

Source: ABC Research, 1986-87, adults 18+ based on respondents familiar with program.

Question: Please rate how acceptable or unacceptable [the show's] sexual content is to you.

about TV sexual and violent TV content also depend on the age of the prospective viewer. Programming that is deemed suitable for adults is often seen as inappropriate for children.

- Different viewers have different opinions about television content. In general, however, specific programs shown on television are found to be inoffensive regarding sexual and violent content by the overwhelming majority of the audience.

While these conclusions apply to both the British and the U.S. data, there appears to be one difference between the two countries:

- The British TV audience is less accepting of violence and more accepting of sexual content than the American audience.

This conclusion is only partially evident from the data shown here. As discussed, there is more pressure in the U.S. to regulate sexual content than violent content, and the research focus on sexual issues in the U.S. reflects that. What is not obvious from these data is the actual content that these data are evaluating: The opinions of the British viewers are responses to programming that is *less* violent than that in the U.S. and has clearly *more* explicit sexual content than U.S. TV. Thus, whatever the level of complaints about "violence on TV" in Britain, it would be higher if

Table 15: Attitudes about TV-Movies with "Sensitive" Themes

(Base)	Lace (412) %	When she says no (199) %	My Mother Secret Life (236) %	Something about Amelia (321) %	The Thorn Birds (591) %
Offended	5	7	8	9	5
N/Offended	92	91	91	89	95
Don't Know	3	1	1	2	-

(Base)	Single Bars, Single Women (194) %	Scandal Sheet (143) %	Consenting Adult (500) %	Surviving (875) %	Hollywood Wives (316) %
Offended	6	10	9	5	6
N/Offended	92	83	90	95	93
Don't Know	2	6	1	-	1

Source: ABC Research "Sensitive Theme" Studies, 1983-1987; adults 18+.

Question: Were you, yourself, offended by anything about (program)?

American movies and series were not edited before they are shown on British TV. And complaints about "sex on TV" in the U.S. would undoubtedly be higher if British standards were applied to U.S. TV. Cultural differences between the two countries are apparent here, despite all the other similarities found in these data.

In sum, our review of public opinion about television content in Great Britain and the United States found a lot of similarities between the data from the two countries. Methodologically, it seems clear that widely used poll data do not reflect the complexity of opinion about this topic and that a variety of unbiased measures is required to assess the views of the audience accurately. Unfortunately, the public debate in both countries has been strongly affected by data which do not seem to provide valid and accurate evidence.

Table 16: U.S.: Viewer Opinions About „Controversial“

	%
<i>"Very descriptive"</i>	
High quality TV	60
Balanced	61
In poor taste	1
Too sexually explicit	2
<i>"Strongly Agree"</i>	
Network provided service by showing this movie	80
Advertisers provided service	71

Source: Linz et al. 1991; based on 463 on-air-viewers of movie "She Said NO", NBC 9/23/90.

The findings of the analyses presented here indicate that there is some general concern about sexual and violent content on television, particularly its effect on children. But this concern seems to be of rather low salience for most people, judging from the low levels of concern expressed about widely watched and frequently criticized programs, including crime series and movies about "controversial" topics. Finally, while "sex" and "violence" are often mentioned in the same breath in debates about TV content, this comparison showed that the issues are quite different and that cultural norms impact them differently: The British audience appears to be more reluctant to accept violent depictions, the U.S. audience seems to live up to Americans' more prudish reputation when it comes to sexual depictions on television.

We hope that this paper will stimulate more international comparisons as well as international research efforts.

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