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TV Violence: a Script for Voluntary Cleanup

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The growing movement to do something about violence on television found a focus last week in Chicago, where the national PTA held hearings and discussed possible action against the major networks. Challenges of television station licenses and boycotts of crime programs' sponsors were spoken of as possible options.

One spokesman for the industry was nearly shouted off the stage when he asserted that "television is the least per-

network television. The battle for ratings—which simply means the drive to obtain the greatest number of viewers each half hour—places severe strains on the networks. If one kind of show is a ratings winner, then that type will proliferate despite public criticism.

The violence problem is exacerbated by the fact that crime dramas are naturals for late evening scheduling. The Family Hour, whatever the motives of those who decreed it, was responsible for the unfortunate concentration of such programs into the last two hours of prime time, 9 to 11 p.m., thus creating the heavy impact of "crime time."

That, plus the long-established practice of block programming—a successful type of program almost inevitably is followed by a similar program—helps create the sheer tonnage of crime drama. Since crime drama plays better in one-hour form, two such programs scheduled back-to-back make such action adventure extremely visible.

Much criticism of television violence in the past has come from groups like the PTA, government agencies, the surgeon general's office and the academic community. Now they are being joined by important advertisers such as General Foods Corp. and advertising agencies such as J. Walter Thompson. Obviously the time is ripe for something to be done about it, and the framework for doing so is already in place.

The practical way for the three networks to cut the number of crime programs without affecting their competitive standing would be for them to use the neutral offices of the Dept. of Justice. The networks recently approached the Justice Dept. for approval of pooling their resources in assuming the costs of broadcasting the 1980 Olympics. Through its business review procedure, the Justice Dept. helps industry ascertain in advance whether contemplated joint actions might trigger antitrust suits.

The three networks could use this same machinery as a pragmatic way out of their dilemma. They would not have to take public positions on whether crime programs are too violent, and no question of censorship would be involved. They would simply notify the Justice Dept. that they were planning mutual actions dealing with violence and were doing so in the public interest.

They might then agree on voluntary action along these lines:

—Prohibition of back-to-back crime time programming, which would break up the 9 to 11 p.m. concentration.

—Limitation of a crime series to no more than 90 minutes per episode.

—Limitation of the number of such programs, perhaps to two or three per week per network, possibly by the start of the 1978-79 season.

Such voluntary action would give the networks sufficient time to develop new program formats for the 1978 season and allow the producers of such programs to turn their resources toward new forms. It should, in part, satisfy the social critics of television, be approved by sponsors who find the advertising of their goods and services often incompatible within programs of contemporary violence and should win the applause of the public as a statesmanlike move to improve the general quality of network programming.

It would be appropriate, I think, for the PTA, the advertisers and other interested groups to urge the networks to begin such a course of voluntary action. In addition, the National Assn. of Broadcasters should endorse the idea and call on its members to adopt the same voluntary restrictions as the networks.

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missive medium in a very permissive age" and added, "There is honest confusion about what is violence."

The PTA, which has been criticizing gratuitous, excessive and socially harmful violence on television for years, will hold a similar hearing in Los Angeles Feb. 22 before drafting a final report and announcing a course of action.

We know there is violence on television. And if there is a cancer that threatens to destroy much of the good that television has to offer, it is violence.

No network official, no advertiser—except, perhaps, the manufacturers of guns whose products get a free ride on television in (living?) color—can defend the large number of shows in which blood and mayhem, brutality and sadism, pimps and prostitutes and hoodlums, mangled bodies and corpses are essential ingredients of storytelling. And who can defend the practice of bringing into our homes graphic illustrations of how to commit a rape, mug the elderly, steal the price of a "fix" or solve human problems with gunfire? What pride can there be in offering so many programs with such tasteless ingredients?

The men and women who operate the networks and those who commit advertising funds supporting programs of dubious quality are caught in the bind. The networks seek vast audiences in order to sell their products. There is nothing wrong in reaching for large numbers, but the result has been an overuse of action-adventure programs, meaning mostly police and private-eye series.

Network officials have firm policies that prohibit the excessive use of violence, but the interpretation of what is or is not excessive varies. There is, however, near unanimity in most quarters about the central issue: There is simply too much violence on the air no matter how well justified individual violent actions may be in the development of a particular story.

What should be done about it? First, network officials should be congratulated on their Second Season schedules which recently were announced. The scheduling of *Who's Who* and the success of CBS' 60 Minutes in prime time are encouraging signs that viewers may soon be seeing more varied, and possibly more worthwhile, television. Another telling sign for the future is the indication that the scheduling of contemporary "action" shows apparently has reached its peak.

Still another sign of change for the better came when Robert T. Howard, president of NBC television, promised last week that the network will deemphasize violence in the future. He said there are few crime programs among the 50 new pilot programs to be announced in mid-April.

No business is more competitive than

If such a program as violence on TV could be resolved by voluntary joint action of the three networks with the advance assistance of the Justice Department's antitrust division, a new method - a new structure of social machinery - will have been created by which the networks could find solutions to other network-industry problems. Such joint actions would permit the networks to take actions which would enhance the general welfare without subjecting any one of them to unfair competition from the others.

In behalf of the cause of lessening network program violence, it would be desirable for the NAB to consider adopting a policy which endorses such network action and which calls upon its members, and all TV stations, voluntarily to limit contemporary action adventure programs for prime time within their own program schedules to the same restrictions assumed by the networks.

This proposed solution will not end all of the problems of television violence, or eliminate opportunities for violence to appear elsewhere as in television movies or theatrical movies aired by the networks and stations. But it is a beginning, and it would eliminate some major time areas where the sound and fury of violence would vanish, and that would be an achievement of real significance. Greater achievements for the improvement of television programming lie ahead, but as a start, the beneficiaries of this first proposed joint industry move will include the viewing public, the broadcasting industry, and the advertisers who finance it, in short, just about everyone.