

TV Ratings and Content on Prime Time

How can the TV ratings system help parents choose appropriate viewing for their children? In 1997, the networks unveiled their first season of programming adorned with rating labels. On prime time television, shows are intended for the general audience and are rated either TV-G (suitable for all ages) TV-PG (may be unsuitable for younger children) and TV-14 (contains material which is unsuitable for children under 14).

The Cultural Indicators Research Project has compiled and analyzed data from the fall 1997 season on these TV ratings and the content of labelled programming, between TV ratings and some harmful behaviors, notably scenes of alcohol and violence.

A scene of violence is any scene among the same set of speaking characters which contains one or more expressions of physical pain, hurting force, or credible threat of injury or death. A scene of alcohol is any verbal or visual depiction of alcohol occurring while the same set of speaking characters is on screen. For the purposes of this analysis we are not including scenes of alcohol or violence occurring during opening titles, commercials, or scenes from upcoming shows, which occur during the airing of the program.

As shown below in Figure and table (1), if a parent wishes to have their children watch only G-rated shows, they will exclude over 80% of prime time dramatic programming from their children's viewing.

However, by allowing their children to watch only G-rated tv shows, parents will succeed in reducing their children's exposure to violent programming by about 30% compared to a random sampling of shows of all different ratings. Scenes of alcohol use also occurs less frequently in shows rated G.

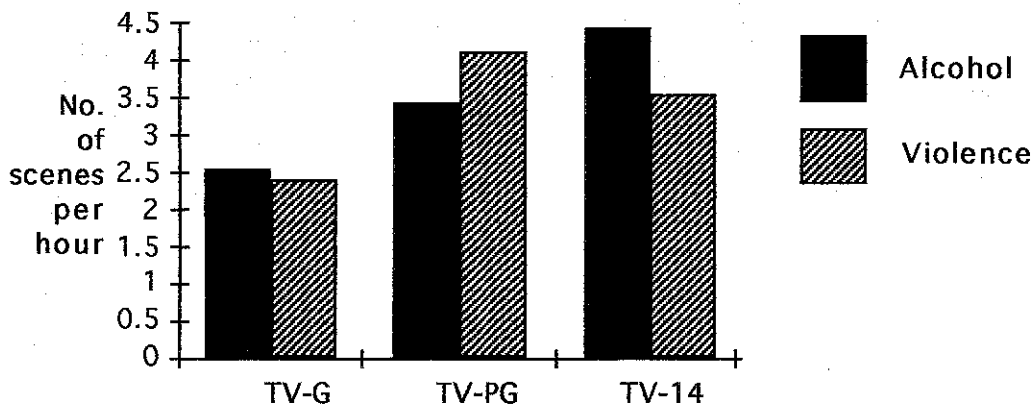


Figure 1.

Figure 1 & Table 1. Average number of alcohol and violent action scenes per hour during 50.5 hours of prime time dramatic programming, according to age-graded rating.

Table 1.

Rating label	TV-G	TV-PG	TV-14
% of sample with rating	18%	64%	18%
Alcohol scenes per hour	2.5	3.4	4.4
Violence scenes per hour	2.4	4.1	3.6

CONTENT LABELS

Content labels can also be helpful for parents to indicate shows which depict harmful behaviors. In response to lobbying by citizen action groups throughout 1996 and 1997, content labels were used in the ratings of programs by ABC, CBS, and FOX. Shows are marked for violence (V), language (L), sex (S), and adult themes (D). As shown below, those labels are a predictor of content, as was intended.

In figure (2) and table (2) below, prime time dramatic programming with a "V" content warning is shown to be over 3 times more violent, presenting violence once every 11 minutes, compared with once every 38 minutes for shows without any content warning.

Depictions of alcohol on prime time appear to be coupled with programs marked for adult themes, adult language, and sexual situations more than with violence. The lack of depiction of the relatedness of alcohol and violence in society has been reported in previous studies.

In the figure and table below, shows are grouped into those with no content label, those with D or S or L (but no V), and those with a V. NBC, which opted out of the content labelling procedure, is not represented here.

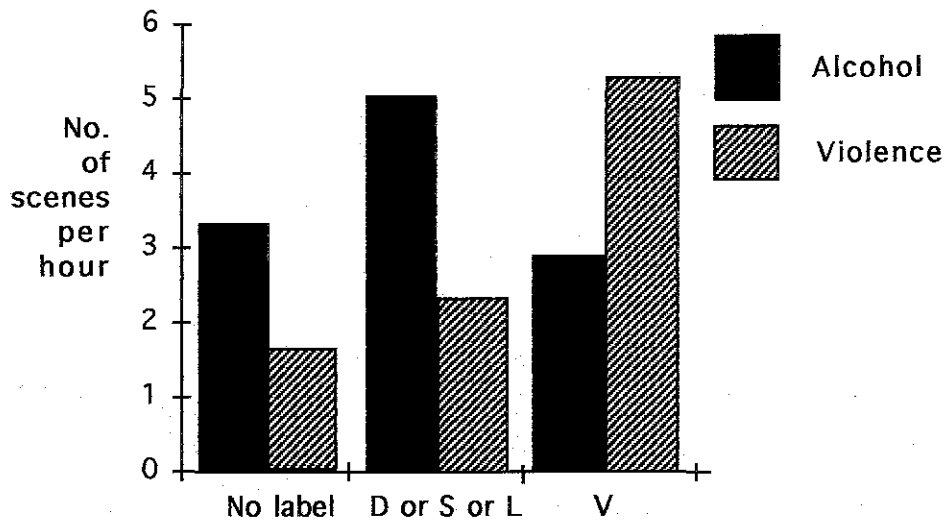


Figure 2.

Figure 2 & Table 2. Average number of alcohol and violent action scenes per hour during 50.5 hours of prime time dramatic programming, according to content label.

Table 2.

	Content labels (none)	D,S,L	V
% of sample with label	41%	30%	30%
Alcohol scenes per hour	3.3	5.0	2.9
Violence scenes per hour	1.6	2.4	5.3

ABOUT CULTURAL INDICATORS

Cultural Indicators Research project is a data base and a series of reports relating recurrent features of the world of television to viewer conceptions of reality. Its cumulative data archive contains observations on over 3,000 programs and 35,000 characters coded according to many thematic, demographic and action categories. CI research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence.

CI is a data base and a series of reports relating recurrent features of the world of television to viewer conceptions of reality. Its cumulative data archive contains observations on over 3,000 programs and 35,000 characters coded according to many thematic, demographic and action categories.

CI research began in 1967-68 with a study for the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. It continued under the sponsorship of the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, The White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation, the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Screen Actors Guild, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, the National Cable Television Association, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the Turner Broadcasting System, the Ark Trust, Inc., the Mental Health Initiatives, Inc., the Women's Initiative of the American Association for Retired Persons, the Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, an agency of the U.S. Public Health Service, the Sloan Foundation, and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the National Institute of Health.

The Violence Profile has been published periodically since 1972, based mostly on prime-time and weekend-daytime dramatic programs. Cable-originated dramatic programs, the Fox network, news, commercials, daytime serials, and game shows have been included in some of the studies. In each case, the focus of the investigation is the contribution of recurrent, stable, and pervasive features of the world of television to viewer conceptions and actions.

Although violence-related findings and indicators have been published most widely, the approach was broadly based from the beginning to collect observations on the role and functions of many aspects of life presented on television. Studies have focused on television's contributions to images of women and minorities; sex-role stereotypes; occupations; political orientation; aging; disability; mental illness; death and dying; school achievement and aspirations; health-related issues such as drugs, safety, nutrition, and medicine; science and scientists; family life; religion; adoption, portrayals of animals, expressions of anger, and other issues.

Principal Investigator is George Gerbner Nejat Ozyegin is Research Director, and Brian Linson (cemad@libertynet.org) is Research Associate. For more information call 215 204 6434, fax 215 2853, or send a message to CEM@libertynet.org.