

HIGHLIGHTS
VIOLENCE PROFILE NO. 9

Trends in network television drama and
viewer conceptions of social reality
1967-1977

by

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This is the first section of the full Violence
Profile No. 9. Copies of the full technical
report including all Tables are available for
\$15.50 each (checks to be made payable to the
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HIGHLIGHTS OF VIOLENCE PROFILE NO. 9

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Television violence dropped sharply in 1977 from the record high reached a year ago. But the evidence continues to indicate television's cumulative cultivation of viewer conceptions of danger, mistrust, and alienation. Moreover, new data suggest that heavy viewers of police and crime shows are more likely than light viewers to act on these conceptions: they report acquiring locks, dogs and guns to protect themselves.

With each of its components showing a decline, the Violence Index is close to the record low of the 1973 season. However, violence still appeared in more than two-thirds of all prime-time programs and in nine out of ten weekend morning programs at the rate of five incidents and 16 incidents per hour respectively. The "family viewing hour" lost its restraining power, with violence rising between 8 and 9 p.m. EST on both NBC and CBS. Movies sampled were also more violent. Although ABC snatched the distinction of being "the least violent network" from CBS, the margins were the smallest in years.

As a scenario of social relationships and power, violence in television drama continues to demonstrate a pattern of unequal relative risks among different social groups. Major characters classified as male, middle class, settled adults, white, or American are somewhat less likely to suffer than to inflict violence as compared to major characters in other social groups. Elderly and young women, nonwhites and male children bear particularly high risk of relative victimization in the world of television drama.

One interesting development, however, is that for the first time in 11 years of monitoring there are no female victims of lethal violence. Although

this improves women characters' life chances, their overall victimization ratio is still unfavorable compared to that of men.

Figure 1 shows the Violence Index and its components from 1967 through the 1977-78 fall season. After a steady, seven-year decline to its record low in 1973, the Index rose to its 1976 peak and then plunged this season to its second lowest point ever. The individual components of the Index reflect this trend, showing that the level of violence remains the same whether it is measured by prevalence across programs, rate of incidents per program, or percentage of major characters involved in violence. (The Violence Index combines these measures into a single indicator of trends.)

The percentage of programs containing some violence has usually ranged from 80 to 90 percent; this season it is 75.5 percent. The rate of violent episodes per hour rose to a record high of 9.5 last season; this year it dropped to 6.7 episodes per hour. The same rate per program (play) fell from last year's peak of 6.2 to this season's 5.0.

Figure 2 charts violence in the time periods and types of programs included in this analysis. Children's (weekend morning) programming was still the most violent. Although violence in the 8 to 9 p.m. EST "family viewing" time slot dropped briefly in the 1975-76 season, the amount of violence in late evening programming increased sharply in that period. Violence was not reduced in late evening programming (9 to 11 p.m. EST) until the present season. Violence across different program types -- including new programs -- reflected these trends. Overall, prime-time comic-tone programs were less violent than other types of programs.

Figure 3 records the level of violence on each network. For the first time since 1973, ABC is the "least violent" network, CBS a close second, and NBC the "most violent" overall, as it has been for nine of the last eleven years. However, the differences are slight compared to previous years.

While CBS, a leader in the "family viewing" concept, increased violence in "family hour" (8 to 9 p.m. EST) programs for the second year in a row, all of the networks, but especially NBC, reduced the level of violence in late evening (9 to 11 p.m. EST) and cartoon programming.

The Violence Profile is based upon findings from a larger, ongoing research project called Cultural Indicators. Part of this project -- Cultivation Analysis -- is designed to identify conceptions of social reality that television tends to cultivate in child and adult viewers. Cultivation Analysis consists of asking child and adult viewers questions about social reality to which the world of television suggests certain answers.

Previous Violence Profiles have reported that heavy viewers tend to respond to many of these questions more in terms of the world of television than do light viewers in the same demographic groups. We have found that television seems to cultivate an exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust in heavy viewers compared to similar groups of light viewers. When asked about chances of encountering violence, about the percentage of men employed in law enforcement and crime detection, and about the percentage of crimes that are violent, significantly more heavy viewers than light viewers respond in terms more characteristic of the television world than of the real world. Mistrust is also reflected in responses suggesting that heavy viewers believe that most people just look out for themselves, take advantage of others, and cannot be trusted.

The current results extend these findings in important new directions. When samples of junior high school students were asked, "How often is it all right to hit someone if you are mad at them?", a significantly higher proportion of heavy than of light viewers answered, "almost always". Both child and adult heavy viewers also report being more afraid to walk alone in the city at night than light viewers in the same groups.

Adult heavy viewers revealed pessimism and alienation when they endorsed in significantly greater proportions than light viewers the following statements: "In spite of what some people say, the lot of the average man is getting worse."; "It's hardly fair to bring a child into the world the way things look for the future."; and "Most public officials are not really interested in the problems of the average man." Television viewing seemed to be associated with these feelings most among middle class, white or female respondents.

Danger, mistrust, and alienation were also reflected in responses to the question, "Do you expect the United States to fight another war within the next ten years?" Heavy viewers answer "Yes" in significantly greater proportions than light viewers, especially when respondents were under 30 or college educated. It is, therefore, not surprising that more heavy viewers in national samples also tend to agree that it would be best for the United States to stay out of world affairs.

Television viewing appears to be associated not only with heightened conceptions of danger but also the tendency to act upon them. Far more heavy than light viewers of police and crime programs report that they "bought a dog for purposes of protection," "put new locks on windows or doors for purposes of protection," and "kept a gun for purposes of protection."

The findings of the Violence Profile, set forth in greater detail in the full technical report, indicate strong and stable associations between patterns of network dramatic content, viewer conceptions of danger, mistrust and alienation and the tendency to act upon these conceptions.

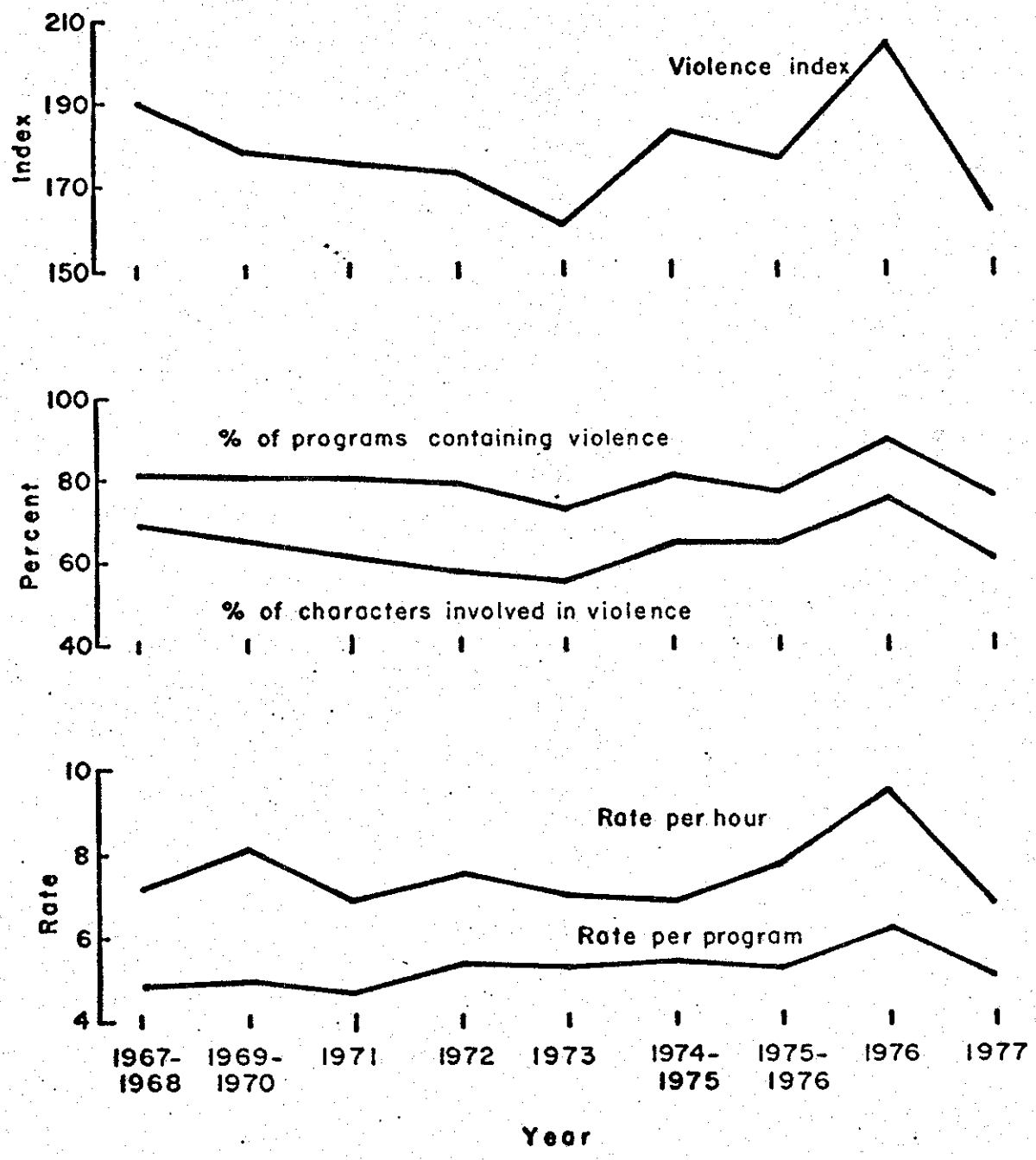


FIGURE 1: VIOLENCE INDEX AND MAJOR COMPONENTS FOR ALL PROGRAMS 1967-1977

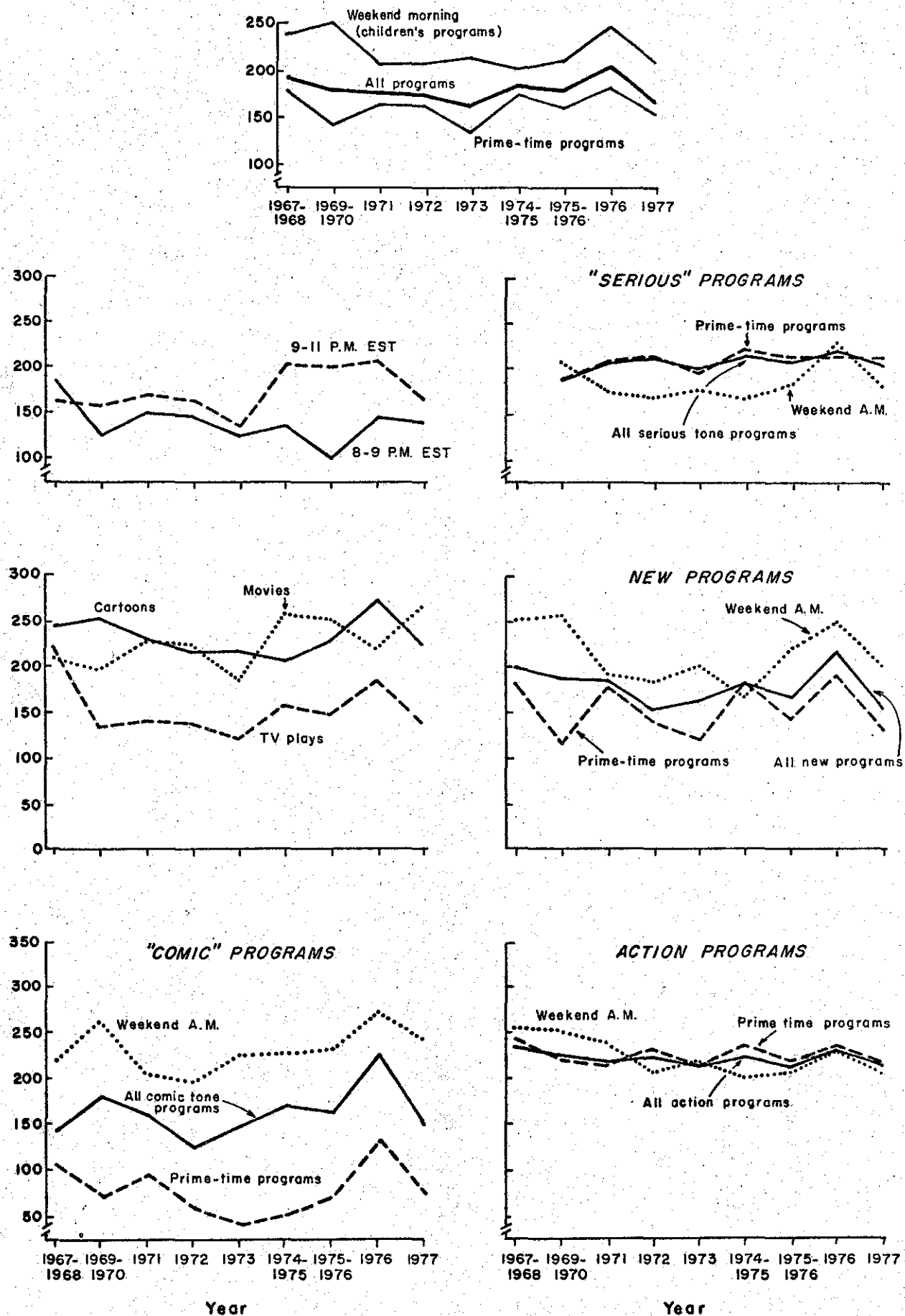


FIGURE 2: VIOLENCE INDEX FOR DIFFERENT PROGRAMS 1967-1977

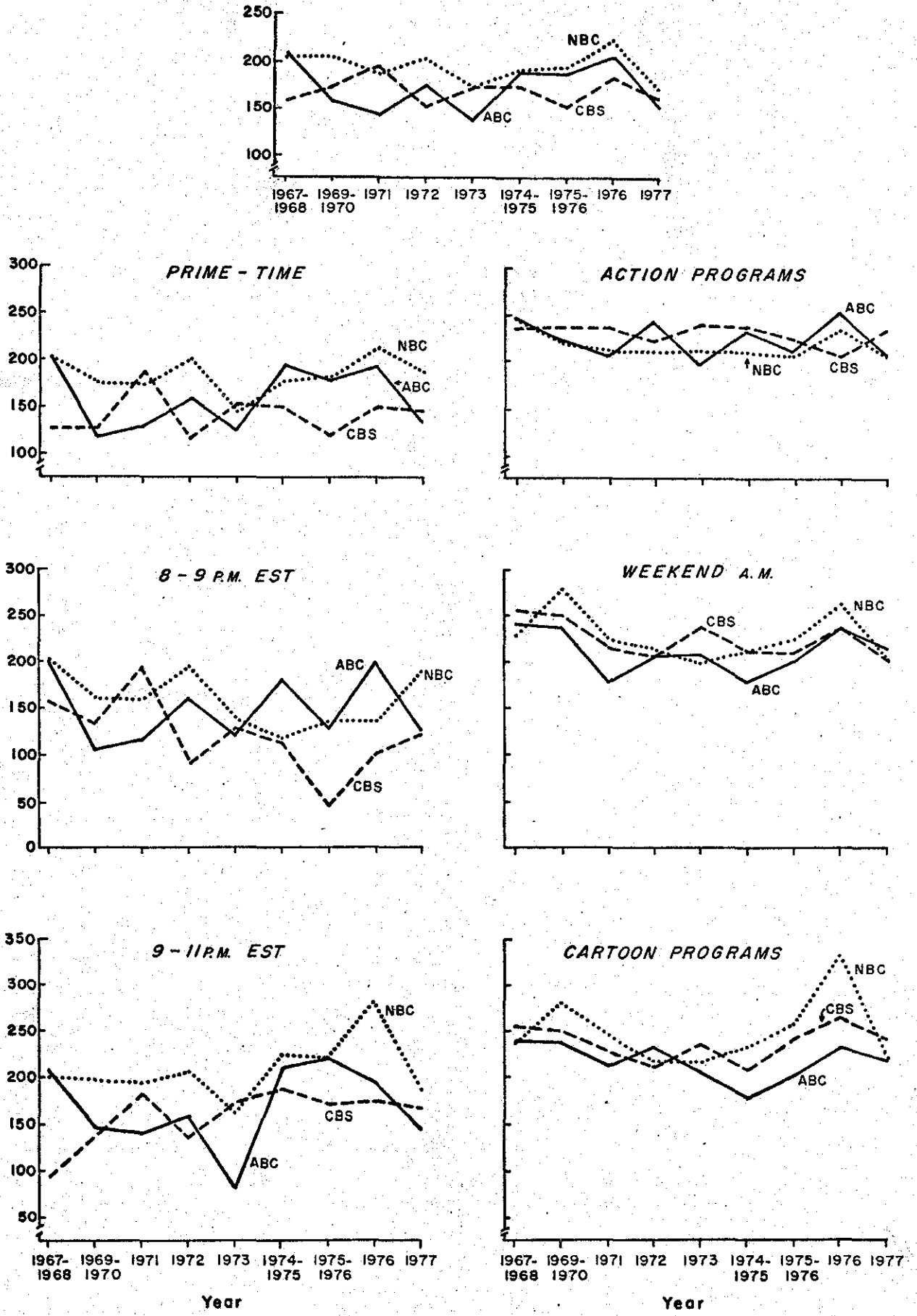


FIGURE 3: VIOLENCE INDEX BY NETWORK AND PROGRAM TYPE 1967-1977