TV GUIDE

TV violence facts and figures

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How much violence is there on television?

The truth appears on this official questionnaire as filed by the Task Force on the Causes and Prevention of Violence

In network television drama:

- *Eight out of every 10 plays contain some violence.*
- *It occurs at the rate of 7 times per hour.*
- *There are 600 separate acts of televised violence per week.*
- *Half of the leading characters act violently.*
- *One out of every 10 kills somebody.*

These are a few of the findings in a remarkable report recently turned over to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. When it began its work last year, in the aftermath of two shocking assassinations, the commission knew that the concern about violence in America was accompanied by widespread suspicion that television has been a significant factor contributing to that violence.

But, though everybody talks about TV violence, nobody knows very much about it. How much of it is there? What forms does it take? There were no reliable answers. The commission decided to get some. It asked Prof. George Gerbner, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania, to head a team of investigators at his graduate research institute to study and report on "the extent and nature of violent presentations" in television drama. Collaborating with Dean Gerbner in the study were Profs. Marten Brouwer, Cedric C. Clark and Klaus H. Krippendorff, staff associate Michael F. Eleey, and scores of graduate student monitors.

Now that report is in the hands of the commission, in the form of a 50-page mimeographed volume entitled "Dimensions of Violence in Television Drama." Because of time limitations—the researchers were given only two months to come up with the answers—it is described as a "bare bones" report, with very little interpretation of the raw quantitative data. Still, it is a unique document: the only body of evidence nailing down precisely what television violence amounts to.

That evidence is summarized in the following pages. Before getting to it, it is necessary to insert a few words about how the research was conducted and what it covered. Those readers who would prefer digging right into the meat of the report may skip the two explanatory sections that follow this one. A full report of this and related studies is being prepared for book publication in late 1969. Dean Gerbner also has announced plans to repeat the study each year as part of a general project providing systematic information about trends in the representation of social issues in the mass media.

How was the study conducted?

First, you have to understand that the report does not necessarily tell you how violent television is *now*. And it certainly doesn't tell you how bloody it's going to be next season, when, according to current indications, the networks will attempt to lower the level of violence in their shows. It does cover one week of programs telecast during October 1968 and another week of programs from the same period of 1967.

The week of Oct. 1 through 7 was chosen as a typical week of American television, and all dramatic programs shown during the peak family-viewing hours of those weeks—during prime evening time and Saturday morning, to be precise—were monitored or screened.

The study was limited to *network* shows and to *dramatic* shows. *Dramatic* was interpreted to include any fictional story—cartoons, situation comedies, melodramas, movies—everything from *Magilla Gorilla to* "The Night of the Iguana" (both of which actually were part of the survey). Dramatic programs accounted for some 60 percent of all network offerings. The other 40 percent—off limits to the researchers—comprised variety shows, game shows, and news or documentary presenta→

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tions (some of which, presumably, contained scenes of *actual* violence).

How is "violence" defined?

For the purposes of the study, it is defined as "the overt expression of force intended to hurt or kill." Within this over-all definition, specific guidelines were set forth for the researchers.

How much violence did they find?

We had better start with the fundamental—and staggering—statistic that opened this article: 8 out of every 10 plays contained some violence. The violence varied, obviously, in degree, in frequency, in quantity, in content; but there it was, in 80 percent of all plays, whether they were comedies or tragedies or cartoons. (The word "play," as used throughout the report, refers to any self-contained fictional presentation of any length, from a five-minute *Banana Splits* cartoon—of which there can be several within one *Banana Splits* hour—to a three-hour movie epic.)

How frequently were acts of violence (harmful actions directed by one character against another) shown? Seven times an hour, on the average, ranging from 5 per comedy hour to 24 per cartoon hour).

A total of 1215 separate acts of violence were counted during the two October weeks surveyed. Exactly 183 plays were studied; 149 of them contained violent episodes—adding up, altogether, to 872 violent episodes (a violent episode being "a scene of whatever duration which concerns the same agent [of violence] and the same receiver"—anything from a fist fight to a battle scene; a violent episode can contain several specific acts of violence).

Every major character in a TV play had more than an even chance of inflicting violence on someone. There were 455 major characters ("principal" roles "essential" to the story) altogether; 241 of them committed violence.

In what sorts of shows does most of the violence occur?

No surprises here. Almost all action programs (crime, Western, adventure, etc.) and cartoons contained some violence—97 percent of the action shows, 95 percent of the cartoons—while the incidence of violence in comedy shows was considerably lower, though not insignificant (67 percent).

There was considerable pressure at the beginning of this season to decrease the amount of on-the-air violence. Did the networks have less of it in the fall of 1968 than in 1967?

No, says the report, "If anything, there was a slight (4 percent) increase in the proportion of hours devoted to programs containing violence."

Yet within this apparently more violent framework there does appear to have been a slight decrease in the *rate* of violent episodes and acts per program. The *acts* figure was 11.1 per violent play in 1967 and 10.5 in 1968.

Now we know how much violence there is—or has been—but what is the nature of televised violence?

This much can be said about the violent acts shown on television:

They were usually performed at close range—in 7 out of 10 conflicts the parties were "within easy talking distance."

There was usually a weapon involved —6 times out of 10.

Half the time the victim was a stranger to his attacker.

Most of the time the violence was unreciprocated—"6 out of 10 violent acts evoked no response from their victims; they could not or did not resist."

Violent encounters were usually between males—more than 8 times out of 10. Only 7 percent of all violent acts were committed by women, and they were the victims of only 6 percent

of all the acts of violence.

If there were witnesses to violent scenes, they were usually passive spectators—half the time there were no witnesses at all, one-third of the time witnesses were present but showed no reactions, in 9 percent of the cases witnesses "assisted or encouraged violence" and in 8 percent of the episodes they tried to prevent it. "On the whole," the report states, "it is safe to conclude that violence is rarely shown as unacceptable."

Physical pain was not a visible result of most violent acts—at least three-fourths of all violent acts left the participants looking good as new. When you consider violent *episodes*, however (remember, they may be the sum total of a number of violent acts), the toll mounts. Half the episodes produced physical injury or death. Two casualties per episode was the average. In 14 percent of all dramatic programs—whether violent or nonviolent—some "gory details of physical injury (blood and wounds)" were shown.

Most violent encounters were between clearly identified "good guys" and "bad guys"—8 out of 10. Half the time the goodies initiated the violence; half the time the baddies started the rumble. But the goodies took it on the chin more often, even though they could be expected to come out ahead by the time the last commercial rolled.

How much killing is there in television drama?

The figures speak eloquently for themselves:

One out of every 10 leading characters killed another person.

One out of every 20 was killed.

One out of every 10 televised acts of violence resulted in death.

One out of 5 people who committed violence killed somebody.

Who are these violent people?

They are usually male, in the prime of life and unmarried. Good guys or bad guys? You can toss a coin.

To delve into this more deeply, let's start with sex—which is seldom where things start on TV, because there aren't enough women to go around. In the make-believe world of television drama males outnumber females by 4 to 1. Among those characters who commit violence, males lead by 6 to 1. There are 8 times as many male killers as females and 7 times as many male corpses.

Every age group had a piece of the violent action, but young-adult and middle-aged characters bit off more than their share. They accounted for 9 out of every 10 killers and 8 out of 10 fatal victims. Young adults were most likely to kill; middle-aged folks were most likely to get killed.

Marriage is a reliable hedge against trouble on TV. Most of the people who inflicted or suffered violence were unmarried.

Lawmen and lawbreakers figured prominently in the survey. They made up one-fourth of the entire dramatic population of television, and they comprised one-third of all violent characters and one-half of all killers. More violence was committed by criminals than by lawmen; but when the agents of law and order became violent, they were just as likely to kill somebody as were the nogoodniks. Seven out of 10 lawmen committed acts of violence, with 2 out of 10 becoming killers. Private eyes were just an eyelash less violent (67 percent), but they rarely injured anyone fatally.

Classifying television's violent people by racial or ethnic characteristics provides some illuminating information about the way drama represents contrasting segments of our population. In the world of TV fiction, foreigners and nonwhites were more likely to indulge in violence than were white Americans: "Major characters playing violent roles included half of all white Americans, →

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6 out of every 10 white non-Americans and nearly 7 out of every 10 nonwhites."

White foreigners were the most likely to be killers; nonwhites were the least likely. And, comparing *all* whites with all nonwhites, 28 percent of the violent white characters became killers, while only 10 percent of the nonwhites did. On the receiving end, foreigners and nonwhites died more often (proportionately) than did white people.

Where does the violence take place?

Far away, generally. As the statistics on violent foreigners and nonwhites imply, the settings for the violence are likely to be outside the normal experience of the majority of viewers—old or futuristic or foreign. If you see a man on horseback, a train speeding through the Balkans or a space ship in flight, you can be almost 100-percent sure that violence has come along for the ride.

As the report puts it: "Whenever the place of action was *not* limited to the U.S. alone or *not* localized to a city, town or village, or whenever foreign themes or people other than majority-type Americans were significant elements in the story, violence prevailed in 9 out of every 10 plays." In contrast, contemporary urban or rural settings "dominated the locales of the great majority of nonviolent plays."

From the point of view of law and justice, how is violence dealt with?

Most of the violence, obviously, was illegal, though much of it was provoked by acts which were themselves flagrantly violent and illegal. But the question of legality or illegality seldom arose. In only 2 out of every 10 violent plays was due process of law—arrest or trial—shown or implied as a consequence of major acts of violence.

When official agents of the law became embroiled in violent episodes, they themselves contributed to the violence two-thirds of the time. In 4 of 10 episodes they initiated it; in 3 of 10 they responded violently to violent provocation; in 2 of 10 they suffered violence and were unable to respond; and in 1 of 10 instances they responded to violence in a nonviolent manner. The report's conclusion: "Police restraint in the face of violence was rare."

What, then, does it all add up to?

It seems to add up to the fact that for the period of this survey, at least, violence had become a conventional, accepted part of almost all of television's dramatic presentations. Again, this was a quantitative study, and the effect of all this television violence on viewers cannot easily be separated from the effect of violence in other media—newspapers, magazines, books, movies, etc.—upon those same viewers.

On television, violence is, on the whole, presented as a customary method for dealing with a problem.

How this is affecting viewers of all ages who are exposed to it—that's a question this study did not seek to answer and does not attempt to answer. Presumably the Commission on Violence will come to grips with this frightfully complex issue, now that it has a clearer picture of the violent content of television.

Testifying before the commission last fall, Dean George Gerbner said: "The study of this content is like the study of the climate or of the tides in the ocean. It will not tell you what you and I will do or where you and I will go, but it will tell you which way the cultural wind blows or the cultural tide flows. It will tell you what all of us are exposed to and, therefore, what enters in one way or another into all that we do."

We have not yet learned how to control our weather, but we can do something about those *cultural* winds and *cultural* tides. We can change their course if we, as a Nation, choose to do so. END