

Scholarly Portrait Of TV Violence

Notes Shifts In Emphasis, Timeslots

By FRANK BEERMANN

Violence in tv holds powerful social messages, applicable to the viewer's race, sex and position in society. That is the conclusion of a study of violence in tv primetime and Saturday morning kidvid, released in summary form by the Annenberg School of Communications of the U. of Pennsylvania.

The study, conducted during one October week in the three years 1967-1969, also shows that violence in cartoons was up, but was decreased in primetime. That shift in emphasis led kidvid animation to increase its violence margin from threefold to sixfold over primetime during the three years. But, in each case, fictive fatalities resulting from violence in the program were down.

The study was begun under the direction of Annenberg dean and professor of communications George Gerbner, on contract for the National Commission on the Causes & Prevention of Violence, and was completed with funds from the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television & Social Behavior. The NCCPV report was released in 1969 under the title, "Violence and the Media," by Robert K. Baker and Sandra J. Ball.

For purposes of the study, "violence" was defined as "the overt expression of force against others or self, or the compelling of action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed."

At least four analysts viewed each program, and the group came up with 281 plays in 182 program hours with 1,355 violent acts. The four or more analysts had to agree, according to the ground rules of the study, before episodes were certified as "violent."

World of TV Drama

The study dealt with the "composite world" of tv drama, and who lives in it and does what to whom. The role of violence in that world and whom it helps and whom it harms was the key problem.

The study group decided that violence, while it had not decreased, had become more efficient. Over the three-year span, those involved in violence—either as violent or victims—went from 73% to 64%, and those involved in fatalities fell from 19% to 5%.

Among the networks, CBS had

less violence during the three years, but at the end that margin was slimming, according to the study. ABC and NBC vied for the lead in violence through the years.

The study found a correlation between frequency of violence and its appearance in comic situations. In kidvid cartoons, where violence was up, its incidence in comic surroundings was up from 42% to 48% of the time. In primetime, where it was down, its occurrence in comic situations was down from 22% to 14%.

But, in any context, the results of violence softened over the years. The weekly casualty list dropped from 437 in 1967 to 134, and "body count" went from 182 to 46 dead per week. The symbolism of violence remained, the study found, but the visible effects were lessened.

Violent action, it was also discovered, was more likely to take place in "fantasy locales, removed from possibly conflicting, disturbing, or perhaps dangerously provocative reality clues." Violence was almost always set in the past or future, and large American cities were less likely to be the scenes of violence.

Another departure from "reality," according to the study, was that two-thirds of the major roles were cast as "male, American, middle-class, unmarried and in the prime of life." They were also, for the most part, unencumbered by normal ties of dependency and societal function. Minorities, on the other hand, were likely to be "entangled in familiar social contexts."

Seven of every 10 characters in tv plays engaged in violence and nine of 10 of those so engaged were men. Despite crime figures which show most crimes of violence to be committed between people who are well acquainted, tv depicts most violence as being against strangers and for purposes of gain, power or duty, rather than passion.

In this dramatic world, said the study, one-third of the characters whose occupations were identified, were professionals in violence, and its employment was seen as a craft or skill.

Women in the study were seen mostly as victims. While half the females under study might hope to escape violence altogether, when

they were involved it was almost always as victims. Among men "victims," only 17% were unable to take steps toward vengeance, but almost half of the women victims made no attempt to get their own back.

Marriage, however, may be seen as something of an equalizer. Married men in dramas were half as likely as their single counterparts to commit violence. But married women are as likely to commit it as single ones and are better able to reciprocate in kind.

Other minorities, the poor, non-whites, non-Americans, were seen as also male and more violent than women in tv. But they were more likely to pay for their violence and more than likely to wind up dead on the tube.

Education In Fear

All of these discovered factors lead the study to its conclusion that tv is an educative tool as projections of "the fears, biases, privilege and desires of men of power upon a global canvas. Violence as a demonstrative power delineates a social structure, depicts relative status differences, defines patterns of domination and submission, cultivates certain norms with regard to influence, freedom and justice and contains other elements of myth in the historic sense of moral ritual."

And because of the money to be made in kidvid and the lower

critical faculties of its audience, that programming area was seen as the "prime training ground for acculturation into the ways of power." The kids, according to the study, learn who can get away with violence and who must pay.

"The cult of violence," the study summary ends, "on American television is, then, a ritual of power not easily altered . . . It serves the structures of power from which it stems . . . Its images and messages perform symbolic tasks of social control."