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VIOLENCE TRENDS IN TELEVISION

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Trends in the prevalence, rate, and role of violence reflect programming policy. Broadcast codes and their enforcement, and the operation of "standards and practices" or other broadcast censorship follow sensitive areas of programming with care and apply such controls as seem to be in the long-range interest of the industry. Programming (especially network) policy also determines the mix of different kinds of programs according to a formula that combines costs and ratings with judgments of both commercial and political expediency. Our earlier examination of program context found that while "action programs" were reduced as a proportion of all programming, the share of crime programs (and cartoons) rose, and the "world" of television drama was becoming more domestic, present-time, and urban oriented. Perhaps partly as a result of policies attempting to control the frequency of violence, the settings in which violence occurred most often — exotic, historical, distant — became less frequent; the tighter scope of violent action came to focus more on the here and now.

At the same time, the thematic order remained remarkably stable except for some declines in themes associated with outdoor and distant action, and increases in themes of crime, law enforcement, business, and the supernatural. The ultimate consequences of these aspects of the dramatic context are in the symbolic functions and social relationships that violence represents.

If we look at the composite trends for all programs, we see that violence has not only come closer to home but has also declined in certain respects. Where do the changes come from?

The only substantial decline has been in the proportion of violent characterizations, especially of those *committing* violence. They decreased from over half of all leading characters to a little more than one-third. Victims, however, decreased less — only from two-thirds to about half of all leading characters — thus raising the relative ratio of victimization.

Nevertheless, the proportion of all those involved in *any* violence decreased from 73 percent in 1967 to 56 percent in 1973, and the proportion of those involved in any killing fell from 19 percent to 7.5 percent. The prevalence of violence declined only from 8 out of every 10 programs to 7 out of 10. The rates of violent episodes changed little in seven years. Thus, as we could foresee from the thematic analysis of program context, violence remained a (or perhaps *the*) staple element of dramatic programming, but the visibility of violent characters, especially of killers (but not so much of victims), was sharply curtailed.

Different types of programs naturally made different contributions to these overall findings. The most notable and steady declines in certain aspects of

violence have been in the types of programming most amenable to network controls: plays produced for television, and cartoons.

The few Westerns (3 in 1973) were more violent than ever, and the growing crime segment was as violent as ever. In fact, the prevalence, rate, and saturation of violence in crime programs were up, raising the crime program score from 108 in 1967 to 129 in 1973. The proportion of violence (but not of victims) in crime plays fell substantially, although the share of killers remained steady and of those killed rose sharply. Crime programming may be increasingly responsible for the strong flavor of successful law-enforcement in much television violence.

Cartoon programming, more violent than crime, increased in the rate of violence per program, and maintained its prevalence at the second highest level in seven year, but reduced the visibility of violent characters and virtually eliminated killing.

Trends in violence are similar for continuing programs and for new programs in each fall season. A sharp increase in feature film violence in 1971 and an even more pronounced decrease in new cartoon violence in 1972 were the exceptions.

A comparison of violence indices for the networks makes it clear that CBS lost its traditional place as the "least violent" and NBC as the "most violent" network; the two joined in a low middle position between their former "ratings." However, ABC, formerly highest with NBC, rapidly controlled its violent programming and gained, with the exception of 1972, the "least violent" position among the networks. The general decline in violent characterizations can thus be attributed mainly to the policies of ABC and to a lesser extent of NBC.

Network comparisons also find "general" (non-cartoon) programs to be the chief source of ABC's "least violent" showing. "Action program" (crime, western, adventure) and cartoon indices show CBS the "most violent" of the networks in 1973.

Network decisions on program mix and standards are reflected in the specific indicators and summary index of violence. In and of themselves such "ratings" are of no scientific or social significance. They do not illuminate causes of consequences. They are useful, however, as concrete manifestations of policies and as checks on declarations of intent.

Bringing violence "closer to home," and reducing the frequency of some types of violent characterizations (but not necessarily of others) have symbolic and social consequences not apparent in these gross figures. We shall now turn to a review of findings more relevant to those consequences. *Symbolic functions: patterns of risk.*

Any show of force demonstrates a structure of power. Any violence exhibits a set of social relationships. These manifestations shape the symbolic functions and guide the human consequences of violent representations.

The most elementary — and most telling — relationship involved in violent

action is that of violent and victim. Symbolic functions and social consequences are implicit in the human types differentially associated with inflicting and suffering violence. The pattern of winners and losers provides a differential calculus of hazards and opportunities for different groups of people in the "world" of television drama. That pattern may cultivate a corresponding sense of risk and margin of fear among those who live much of their lives in that "world," and who may project its symbolic structure into their conception of social reality.

Examining the patterns of violence and victimization, the question arises as to who tend to commit and to suffer how much violence? Which groups do the shifting ratios of victimization favor over which other groups in the symbolic "world?"

First, in every year since 1967, and in almost every category of dramatic characters, victims outnumber violent. However, also in nearly every group, there are more killers than killed. The symbolic functions of getting hurt are obviously different from those of getting killed. Fear of victimization pervades the world of television drama, and may cultivate a corresponding sense of danger in the world of social reality. However, perpetrators of television violence often serve only to provoke the hero to righteous indignation. The final blow must favor those who survive to serve the cause of justice, power, and happy endings.

The sense of victimization did not decline as the proportion of violent characters, and especially of perpetrators, decreased. On the contrary, the social patterns seem to sharpen with every reduction in violent. The proportion of victims was the highest of all seven years in 1973: there were 1.4 victims for every violent, meaning that for every 10 characters who hurt or killed another, 14 were hurt or killed. The ratio in cartoons was 1.7, also the highest; for every 10 violent cartoon characters, there were 17 victims.

Secondly, although women were less likely to get involved in violence than men, for five of the seven years studied they were more likely to be victimized, and always more likely to be killed.

We see that the 1967-73 totals show 1.2 male and 1.3 female victims for every violent male and female. Even more striking are the differential risks of fatal victimization. There were more than two male killers for every male killed; but for every four women killers, six women were killed.

The pattern of risks for different age groups shows that violence is most likely in young adulthood. More than eight out of ten young men and nearly six out of 10 young women are involved in some violence. When so involved, young adult women are more likely to be victimized than young adult men. The young men are the most likely of all groups to get away with fatal violence: for every one killed there are four killers among them. This is clearly the group that tends to strike the final blow.

Unmarried males generally fare better than married, but unmarried women

fare much worse than anybody. Single women are the most likely of all groups to be killed; they have five killed for every two killers. For both married women and for all males the odds are reversed. In the world of television drama, men lose and women gain power in marriage, narrowing but not closing the gap of sex role inequality.

The most likely to get involved in violence are the lower class characters of both sexes. Lower class women are also the most victimized: they suffer five victims for every one of their group able to inflict violence. Nationality patterns tend to favor Americans over others, except that foreign women are more lethal than foreign (but not American) men. The racial patterns shows whites to have the upper hand in every category of both sexes.

Mostly likely to get involved in violence, then, are lower class, foreign, and nonwhite men, in that order. Old men have the most favorable, and male children the most unfavorable odds of general male victimization. Young adult males have the best and old men the worst male killed-killed ratios.

Among women, most likely to get involved in violence are lower class, foreign, single and young adult, and nonwhite. Women are the most victimization-prone, especially lower class, nonwhite, and old women. Only married and foreign women, but most groups of men, have the power to strike more lethal blows than they suffer. Single women suffer fatal violence by far the largest ratios of all groups.

The pattern of victimization implicit in television drama thus demonstrates an invidious sense of risk and power. Symbolic violence potentially trains victims as well as perpetrators. Furthermore, indicators of these symbolic functions are not as easily altered or manipulated as are those of sheer frequencies. Simple selective reductions in violent characterizations may sharpen rather than blunt the discriminatory edge of social relations inherent in the portrayals. Risk ratios are a first step toward indicators that can illuminate the human quality and social equity as well as the quantity of various aspects of violent portrayals.

TV CODE BOARD ACTS

The Television Code Review Board of the National Association of Broadcasters has recommended that the language of the Code be amended in order to deal with programs inappropriate for a general family audience during early evening time periods and to provide for advisories for certain programs. The program language is subject to approval by NAB's Television Board of Directors.