One More Time: An Analysis of the CBS "Final Comments on the Violence Profile"

GEORGE GERBNER, LARRY GROSS, MARILYN JACKSON-BEECK, SUZANNE JEFFRIES-FOX, AND NANCY SIGNORIELLI

Symmetry more than substance compels us to pursue a dialogue that threatens to make the lively subject of television violence bog down in tedium. But behind the contentions and technicalities over a mixed bag of issues, we perceive a deeper structure shaping and straining this colloquy. As our (we hope) final contribution in this context, we shall try to elaborate what that constraint might be, and what it suggests for the future of research relevant to televison program policy.

CBS persists in claiming that "comic and accidental violence, and violence resulting from acts of nature, ought not be included in any measure of the amount of violence." Our previous analysis clearly indicates that there are no real "accidents" or "acts of nature" in fiction. They are simply ways of presenting violence and victimization. We have also noted that comic content is a highly effective form of conveying serious lessons. Finally, we have indicated that idle threats, comic gestures, verbal abuse, or any non-credible suggestions of violence are *not* included in our definition. Also, our findings are reported separately for comic programs so that any careful reader can assess their independent contributions to the total pattern. So why this insistence on excluding comic and "accidental" violence?

Of course, the more inclusive the count the higher the number CBS considers damaging. But there is also another clue in the CBS attempt to determine what violence is "meaningful." Previously, that attempt led CBS to suggest that the criterion of "meaningfulness" is "that violence which reasonable citizens consider harmful." But why? Why not that which reasonable citizens consider *helpful?* Is that less meaningful? Our research does not find it so. But it may be less troublesome from the point of view of corporate policy, and, therefore, less "meaningful" from a strictly policy-oriented point of view.

That point of view becomes even more sharply defined in the new CBS criterion of meaningfulness, now offered as an argument for exclusion: "In our view, comic and accidental violence is simply not meaningful in the context in which the debate over television violence is conducted." Our research has shown that context to be relatively uninformed of a variety of significant lessons to be derived from exposure to television violence. We believe that a scientific effort to discover all socially important effects of television violence, rather than to take the terms of the popular debate at face value, would serve both the public and CBS better than its rigid defense of corporate policy in the face of often unwarranted criticism.

Apparently, CBS researchers also believe that comic and accidental violence may be significant, even if they continue to exclude it from the "overall count." There is a discrepancy between what Vice President Blank writes and what the CBS Office of Social Research reports.

The May 1977 CBS Monitoring Report states (on pages 15-16) that the CBS definition (modeled on and very similar to ours) "included accidents or acts of nature which occurred in a violent context as, for example, a person being killed in an automobile accident while escaping from a crime." In another passage, the CBS report notes (page 6, footnote) that "In this season's tabulations, episodes of dramatic violence that occur in situation comedies were included in the totals for the 'other programs' category . . . . We continue to exclude comic violence from our overall count."

It seems, therefore, that the need for the exclusion does not come from research considerations but from pressures for a "better bottom line." What is most at stake here is the area of children's programming, particularly cartoons, which contain the most frequent (and stereotyped) violence. We cannot agree that such a critical area should be exempt from accounting and scrutiny.

The CBS discussion of the "neutrality" of our content measures is puzzling. We said that measures of content should not *presume* effects. Rather, content measures facilitate the effective investigation of effects. Ecologists measure the amount of certain chemicals in the air or water (as we do in the symbolic environment) in order to ascertain their presence and then to test—rather than to presume—their effects on people. So the "boundary line" should

be drawn not in accepting the popular presumption of ill-defined effects but in the clear and unambiguous observation of the element (in this case of violence) in *any context*. Only such observation can lead to the investigation of the behavioral and conceptual correlates of exposure to strictly defined violence. Proceeding in that way, our research indeed found several very meaningful correlates of exposure, some of which may be quite helpful to some groups.

The underlying problem again may be that CBS is constrained by the nature of critical public discussion which often jumps to unwarranted conclusions. One such conclusion is that the major or only "meaningful" effect of exposure to television violence is the instigation of aggression. That presumption forces on CBS the task of corporate defense, even at the risk of distorting the research issue.

In the course of accepting rather than attempting to transform the terms of the popular debate about TV violence, CBS gets into even more hot water. CBS prides itself on its own research on a few children's programs demonstrating "that children can receive prosocial messages in a comic context." CBS claims that we "ignore the fact that these programs were designed to convey and reinforce messages of a socially acceptable, socially reinforced nature." Well, last fall's overall CBS weekend daytime fare hit a five-year record of 19.2 violent episodes per hour (up from 14.2 the year before). Does CBS mean to suggest that all these other programs were *designed* to be socially unacceptable and destructive? Its defense against simplistic criticism puts CBS in that box. CBS sinks even deeper when it contends that our measures of the abundance of gross and explicit violence in children's programs constitutes "a long and unsupported jump to the assumption that children are picking up hidden messages of violence from comic routines!"

Similar problems plague the CBS discussion of the Violence Index itself. Vice President Blank as an economist can see the validity of multidimensional measures of GNP or unemployment. These and other measures he approves "result from closely-reasoned efforts to measure phenomena which are of social or physical consequences." But similar efforts to establish Cultural Indicators (of which the Violence Index is a current example) are dismissed as "nonsense." Why?

The closest we can get to a cogent reason is that the weighting of the components going into the Index is "arbitrary" and that we

have not given sufficient attention to the individual components, even though we have included them in our reports.

What are these weightings and components? The Violence Index is composed of (1) the percent of programs containing any violence, plus (2) the rate of violent episodes per program, plus (3) the rate of violent episodes per hour, plus (4) the percent of major characters involved in any violence, plus (5) the percent of major characters involved in any killing. Each of these measures has a specifically defined meaning and function in our analysis. The *only* "weighting" is that we double two rates (2 and 3) in order to raise the low numerical values of these ratios to the level of importance that we believe the concepts of the frequency and program saturation of violent incidents deserve when combined with the other numbers which, being percentages, typically have much higher numerical value. No one is forced to agree with or follow that simple assumption. The individual components for all years are included in our reports and are available for any combination.

The bulk of the Violence Index and Profile is a set of 71 Tables. Thousands of Profiles have been distributed. The composite Violence Index combines the components by means of the formula explained above. Violence Profile No. 8 specifically states (on page 21) that the individual "measures of violence are based on analysts' observations. They are provided in all tabulations and should be used as basic indicators of trends. However, for ease of illustration and comparison, they are combined to form summary scores and an index. These are not statistical findings in themselves, and should not be treated as such. Rather they serve as convenient illustrators of the basic findings and to facilitate gross comparisons."

It is true that most public discussion revolves around the composite Index. Similarly, the broadcast industry refers to overall Neilsen or Arbitron ratings, although these are composed of demographic and other separate—and sometimes conflicting—components. We believe that there is a general validity to the overall Index, and that consistently applied, it does show meaningful trends in performance. As CBS knows best, the detailed tabulations do not get on network news or into newspaper headlines. We disseminate complete information; it is up to the media to do their homework and use such Violence Index components or combinations of components as they see fit.

CBS reflects some irritation with the perhaps less than felicitous phrasing in our 1977 Report that "CBS, leader in the 'family viewing' concept, lifted its two-season lid on family viewing time violence . . ." Let us look at the individual components of the "family hour" Index for 1973, 74, 75, and 76.

Percent of fall season CBS family hour programs containing any violence: 50, 50, 27, 63. Percent of hours containing violence: 60, 56, 31, 60. Rate of violent episodes per program: 4.4, 3.1, 1.8, 1.4. Rate of violent episodes per hour: 5.9, 3.9, 3.1, 2.2. Percent of leading characters involved in any violence: 43, 29, 23, 32. Percent of leading characters involved in killing: 13, 7, 0, 0. It is clear as we report, that while the number and rate of "family hour" violent incidents declined, and killing by or of leading characters was eliminated, the percent of programs with violence and characters involved in some violence has increased, making the overall "family hour" Index 127 in 1973, 100 in 1974, 60 in 1975, and 101 in 1976. (The corresponding Index numbers for *all* CBS drama were 174, 174, 154 and 181.) The factors that determine these movements are clearly not our measures but network policy and its application by the network's department of Standards and Practices. If next season's program mix shows a policy of replacing the "lid" on more or all aspects of violence, we shall be pleased to report it.

The CBS list of family hour programs and the rhetorical question "Which of these programs did parents need to have their children avoid because of violence?" continues the persistent misreading of the issue and of our reports. Nothing we report suggests that parents have children avoid specific programs. The Violence Index and Profile measure aggregate programming policy and its consequences. These are cumulative over the years, do not stem from single programs, and involve a variety of lessons of different potential value for different groups. Reducing violence to a mechanical and one-dimensional issue only reinforces the superficiality of the popular debate.

The CBS discussion of units of analysis and sampling adds little of substance to what we have discussed before. Our units, defined according to participation of the same characters, are easier to code, yield more information—and more but briefer incidents—than those of CBS. They further help to place the violence in a social context. That is something CBS and other networks have long demanded, but refuse to do themselves. The investiga-

tion of such context is highly indicative of a variety of potential lessons to be derived from TV violence. But it is not a prime subject of popular criticism and is therefore of little corporate interest.

The variability of year-to-year incidents of violence has been equally large in both our and the CBS samples (cf. the 1977 CBS report, page 4). That is why we (unlike CBS) use the much more broadly-based Index which combines several measures, and discuss upward or downward trends over the years, rather than statistical differences from one year to another. In fact, until the sharp and surprising rise in violence last year, our reports tended to emphasize the *lack* of significant change, despite repeated network promises and protestations.

The rationale for focusing on regularly scheduled dramatic programs should be obvious. Our study is designed to investigate the representative and repetitive patterns of programming, and not the occasional or exceptional "specials." It is not at all difficult to define what is a "special;" the networks promote them heavily and usually announce that "the regularly scheduled program will return next week." However, *any dramatic production* such as "Roots" or a mini-series would be included in our analysis if it fell within our sample week. If and when the actual variability of the week-to-week programming pattern justifies enlarging the sample to obtain representative results, we shall do so. At the present time that is far from the case. Behind the revolving door of formats and titles, there is a persistent stability of basic content elements and social patterns portrayed in the programs.

This brings us to the last point of some substance. CBS claims that our findings would suggest that "women and nonwhites are meeker and less aggressive in defending their rights than they used to be." That is careless reading and tendentious reporting of what we actually found. We say nothing about what women and minorities do because that is not what we study. We study the pattern of television violence and find that it places a higher burden of relative victimization upon women, nonwhites, and other minority groups such as children and the elderly than upon the white male majority. We also find that heavy viewing of television, with other factors kept constant, is related to a sense of exaggerated danger and mistrust. An independent study by Dr. Nicholas Zill of the Foundation for Child Development has since come to the same conclusion for children. Of course this does not mean that television alone determines human behavior. What it indicates is that

violence-laden television drama cultivates an unequal sense of vulnerability within a conventionally stereotyped power and value structure. Both the growing militancy of some groups and the growing resistance to change of others, as well as the increasing fear of most, takes place in that cultural environment. Television is an important contributor to these trends.

We are in the process of expanding and diversifying our monitoring and cultivation studies. We are developing additional indicators of family life, aging, health and medicine, and other key issues regularly presented in television programming. What we have profited from this and other exchanges will thus be put to use in our continuing studies.

Only an independent effort can afford to let the chips fall where they may. In the long run, that is the best protection for the public and also for the TV industry. As broadcasting policy develops in new directions, we will report the facts, as we have in the past. Independent scientific research is the best defense against uninformed or unwarranted public criticism and the best guide to policies that reflect careful consideration of all important social consequences.