Television Violence

Measuring the climate of fear

There is now hard evidence that the false imagery constantly beamed into millions of American homes warps our values and promotes needless anxieties.

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Following the lead of the U.S. Surgeon General and of recent research, the AMA has declared television violence an environmental hazard and is moving to curb it.

Confusion has surrounded the issue of TV violence mainly because of the lack of a clear-cut definition of the problem. My associates and I have been working for almost a decade, seeking to define and measure the nature and effects of the violence depicted on television. There is now sufficient scientific evidence to conclude that television alone (as well as in combination with other social and cultural factors) makes a significant difference in the way viewers deal with reality.

This evidence comes from our long-range research project called Cultural Indicators, conducted for the Eisenhower Violence Commission, the Surgeon General of the United States, and now for the National Institute of Mental Health. Let me describe how we track violence from the tube to the viewer.

The Cultural Indicators research consists of two steps. The first is the periodic analysis of the "facts of life" in the composite world of television drama. What is that world like? Who populates it, and who does what to whom in it? Does the pattern change over time?

The data come from the monitoring of annual samples of network television drama. Trained coders make detailed observations about themes and other characteristics of dramatic programs, about the types, personalities, and interactions of characters appearing in these programs, and about selected types of action.

The research began in 1967. By the spring of 1976, we had a computerized data archive consisting of the coded analysis of 813 programs, 2,285 characters featured in the programs, and 4,068 specific episodes on which to base indicators of trends and overall content configurations.

The second step of the research is to determine what viewers learn from "living" in the world of television drama. Guided by our findings about this fantasy land, we frame questions based on social realities that we ask television viewers.

To each of these questions there can be a "television answer," which tends to reflect the way things appear in that special world, and another and different answer which is biased in the opposite direction, or closer to the way things really are. We ask these questions of sample groups of adults and children, and for each respondent, we record the amount of television exposure he or she has had, the habits of the respondent with respect to exposure to other media, and demographic characteristics.

We then compare the responses of "light" and "heavy" television viewers, controlling for sex, age, education, and other characteristics. (Heavy viewers are defined as those who watch television more than four hours a day; light viewers, less than two hours.) On questions dealing with life as presented on television, heavy viewers tend to reflect the television world more closely in their answers than do light viewers. Taken as a whole, these responses indicate the conceptions of social reality that television viewing cultivates in the minds of those who watch it.

Now let us focus on violence. In our research, we define it as the overt expres-

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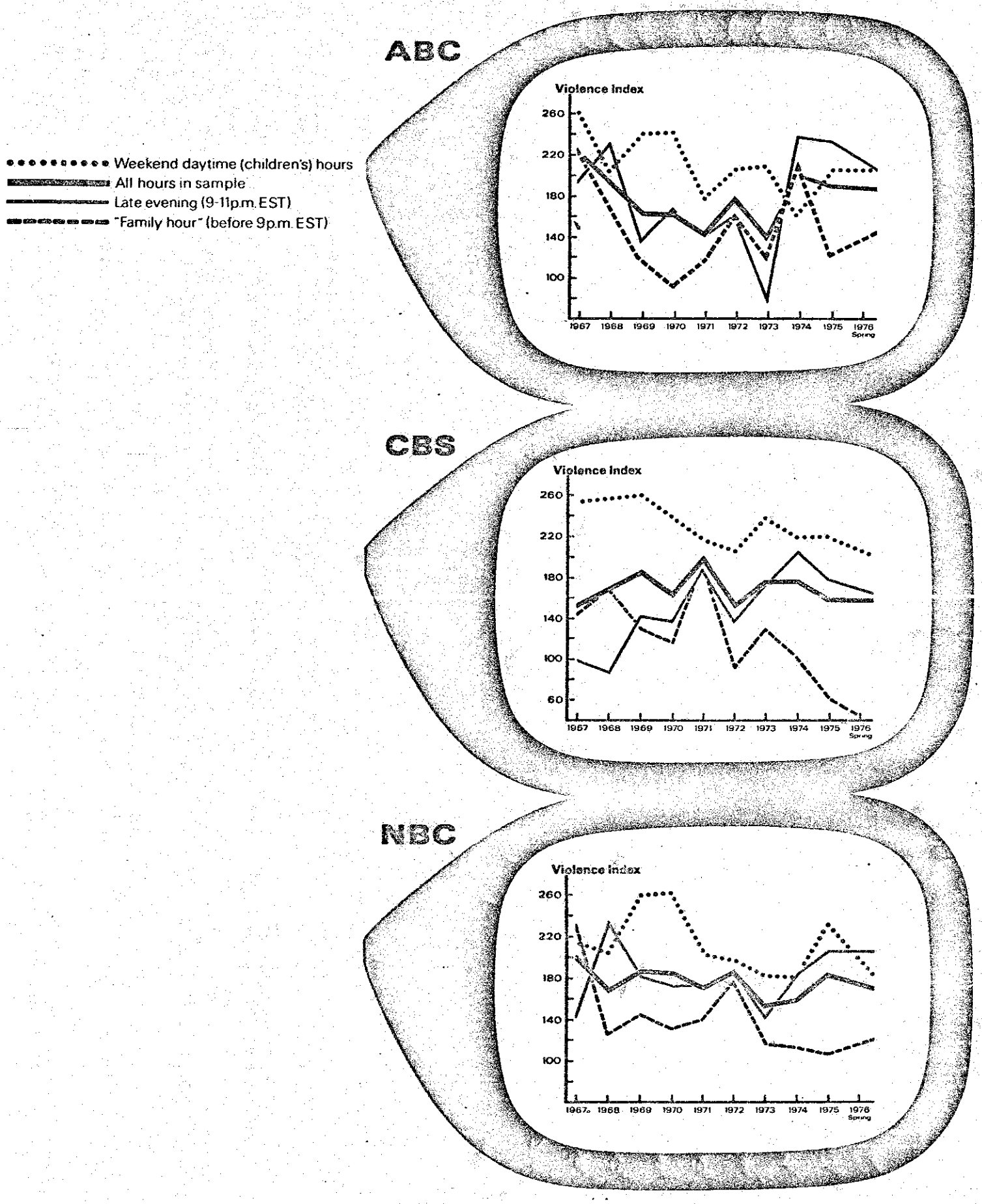

The graphs at left show the trends for the past 10 years for different hours of programming and separately for each network. The "violence index" is based on specific incidents and characters noted by trained observers and tabulated by the author and his associates in a long-range project. The zigzagging lines indicate a slight and tentative downward trend in violence, perhaps due to the "family hour" and most clearly evident on CBS.

sion of physical force that compels action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or that actually hurts or kills. This is a conservative and clear-cut definition that can be reliably and unambiguously observed by our coders.

In the first step of our investigation of violence, we examine all dramatic programs in prime time and weekend daytime (children's) programming: televised films, cartoons, plays, and series.

We observe the significant traits of each violent incident and character. We then tabulate the percent of programs containing any violence, the rate of violent episodes per program and per hour, the percent of characters engaged in any violence, either as perpetrators or as victims or as both, and the percent of characters involved in killing (both the killers and the killed). From this information, we devise a Violence Index, a single figure composed of the sum of all these measures.*

Our Violence Index is now used by networks, congressional and other government agencies, and citizens' groups to track the amount of TV violence on the air. (In the future we shall also include news programs in our analysis.) The charts on page Impact/1 show the trends for the past 10 years for different hours of programming and separately for each network. Behind all the zigzagging, we can discern a slow, slight, and tentative downward trend in violence, perhaps due to the "family hour" and most clearly evident on CBS.

Some Sad Statistics

Nevertheless, after some 10 years of hearings, investigations, and presidential commissions, more than eight out of every 10 network programs (nine out of every 10 cartoons) still contain violence. The overall rate of violent episodes is still five per program and twice as high in children's cartoons—substantially unchanged since we started monitoring in 1967.

About 65% of all leading characters (85% in children's programs) are still involved in some violence, as they have been each year since 1967, and about 10% are still embroiled in killing. (That figure, incidentally, has ranged between a high of 19% in 1967 and a low of 6% in 1969.)

The slight decline which has taken place recently in the overall Violence Index has been due to reductions in a few component measures, such as that for on-screen killers, especially during weekend children's hours and on the "family hour." (The "family hour" concept, incidentally, has recently come under judicial attack because it was allegedly forced on the three major networks by the National Association of Broadcasters and the Federal Communications Commission.) Some of the reduction in TV violence, moreover, is offset by increases in other components later in the evening and—strangely enough on weekend children's programs.

For example, while involvement in killing during what is now known as the "family hour" (7-9 p.m.) went down from 28% of all leading characters in 1967 to 1% last season, it rose in the 9-11 p.m. (EST) period from 9% in 1967 to 23% last year. Moreover, the percentage of violent leading characters during the weekend, daytime children's hours (mostly cartoons) increased from a low of 65% in 1974 to 85% last season.

A Violence Profile

The Violence Index provides us with a measurement of the quantity of television violence; to learn something of its nature and possible impact we construct a Violence Profile each year. It contains a number of factors, the most important of which is the Risk Ratio. This shows the relative chances of victimization of each age, sex, and social group in the fictional population.

For example, for every incident in which a male is violent there are 1.19 male victims, but for every incident in which a female is violent there are 1.32 female victims. Similarly, children; lower-class, foreign, and nonwhite characters of both sexes; and older women are more likely to fall victims than to be perpetrators of violence. Old, poor, black women are cast for violent parts *only* to be killed.

This indicator, with its fairly stable pattern of relative victimization, tends to confirm conventional (if prejudicial) notions of power and vulnerability in American society. Thus, not just aggression but fear, prejudice, and power are linked to television viewing, and may have even more far-reaching consequences than do sporadic outbursts of imitative mayhem. Violence is a social scenario which requires that victims as well as perpetrators play their "proper" roles.

Violence on television is unlike that in movies or books because television is a very different medium. It is accessible from cradle to grave; you don't have to go anywhere to see it, and you don't even need to know how to read. It comes home to all classes and groups everywhere in the industrialized world. And it is used nonselectively; most people watch by the clock, not by the program, and the TV clock is on over six hours a day in the average U.S. household. Television is like the environment; it's everywhere and it's indivisible.

Its world view and its values are implicit in the total programming structure, not only in individual isolated programs. To analyze TV violence, one has to examine the distribution of values and power in the entire world of television, not merely in violent programs—just as pollution is a part of the total organization of industry and not only of the chemistry of air and water.

Television reflects the violence of the real world selectively. The leading causes of injury and death in the real world, for example, are highway and industrial accidents, but we rarely see those on television.

*A more detailed and technical description of this index can be found in "Living with Television: The Violence Profile," by George Gerbner and Larry Gross, in the Spring, 1976, issue of the *Journal of Communication*, and also in the April, 1976, *Psychology Today*.

TV, like all storytelling, presents forms of violence that best serve its dramatic and social functions. It demonstrates how power works in society, and who can get away with what.

Fear and Insecurity

The second step of our research, yielding the final parts of the Violence Profile, provides convincing evidence that television viewing does make a significant contribution to the way people deal with reality. In presenting victims as well as perpetuators of violence, and usually in greater numbers, television generates fear as well as aggression. Furthermore, in stereotyping people and their fates, it sets up a hierarchy of fears that helps some groups of people exercise more power than others. Our comparisons of the responses of heavy and light viewers within the same sex, age, and other demographic categories show that heavy viewers are more fearful, anxious, and mistrustful than light viewers in the same circumstances.

Television violence, then, generates fear of victimization and a sense of insecurity, as well as the inclination by some to take advantage of the fears of others. Children growing up with television learn its lessons and rehearse its roles.

We are now studying the extent, if any, to which stereotyped, prejudicial, social patterns that are a part of most TV violence inject into heavy viewers a significantly larger dose of those prejudices.

It should be clear by now that the complex problem of television violence calls for careful diagnosis and broadly conceived measures. These measures must be adequate to deal with a whole range of consequences that are much more far-reaching than might originally have been surmized.

Violence plays a key part on prime-time television (even though the most popular shows are usually nonviolent) and exposure to these programs not only incites the few, but also shapes distorted conceptions of social reality among the many. Potential incitement to mayhem among a minority of viewers is bad enough but the cultivation of fear and rigidity among many is scarcely less damaging in its long-range effects.

When this is coupled with prejudice and other forms of misanthropy built into the structure of dramatic television, we are clearly confronted with a most serious problem. In short, the incitement of some and the terrorization of others creates a climate in which organized social violence becomes acceptable. That dreadful scenario sets in motion forces that attack not only individual health and welfare, but also the fair and equitable conduct of social policy.

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Chief Socialization Instrument

Fighting violence on the air—and in society—requires more than a new rating game in which the lowest score wins. Television has suddenly grown to be our chief instrument of socialization and enculturation. It is the new national curriculum for all—financed from advertising budgets, awarded on the basis of how cheaply the medium can collect audiences and deliver them to sponsors—and this undertaking is run essentially from three national network offices by men (no women!) largely unknown and unaccountable to the American public.

Violence is an integral part of that structure, resistant to change because it has always been tackled on a narrow front. Along with specific attacks on the amount and nature of violent portrayals, we need a broad-gauged inquiry into the financial base and policy-making machinery of television programming.

Only in that context can we hope to make *all* the critical parts of the new "people's curriculum," including the presentation of violence, reflect the true variety, creativity, and humane purposes of American society.

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