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Study Beats Up  
On Violence Ratings  
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survey issued yesterday suggests that parents shouldn't bother using the new content-ratings system to judge violence levels in TV shows, because the different labels hardly seem to make a distinction.

The survey was immediately and roundly panned by network executives.

"If parents think that using the guidelines will protect their children from violence, they're crazy," said George Gerbner, professor of communications at Temple University.

According to Gerbner's survey of programming last fall, there is little difference in the number of violent acts per hour in shows rated TV-G (for general audiences), TV-PG (unsuitable for younger children) and TV-14 (unsuitable for folks younger than 14).

However, a broadcast standards executive responded that Gerbner's methodology was flawed and contrary to previous surveys on violence.

"I have no idea what Gerbner was looking at," said the executive. "He doesn't specify if it was broadcast, cable or pay cable."

Gerbner's study of 50.5 hours of prime-time network dramas indicates that TV-G-rated shows contain just one-third fewer scenes of violence than those rated TV-14.

"This from the man who several years ago called the 'Laugh In' reunion that year's most-violent program," said another network executive.

Gerbner's researchers defined violence as the "overt use of force against one's self or another person" in a manner meant to hurt or kill. "There were no ambiguous references," he said. "If you say, 'I'll kill you,' and it's a joke, we don't count it."

The survey found that TV-G-rated drama programs contain 2.4 incidents of violence per hour; TV-PG carry 4.1 acts per hour; and TV-14 contain 3.6 acts of violence per hour.

However, Gerbner's study found that the V, S and L letter designations to warn of strong violence, language or sexual content were more helpful. Dramas with a V label were found to have more than three times more violence

~ one scene every 11 minutes ~ compared with those without the designation, which had violent acts every 38 minutes.

"This is a man who counts," said an executive. "As you move from G to PG to 14, there is an escalating intensity. To me, this is just vintage Gerbner not taking context into account. With him, the violence on 'Touched by an Angel' is just as bad as 'NYPD Blue.'"