



VIOLENCE ON TV

No topic touches a nerve in American homes as does violence on television, especially its effect on children.

What do we know in 1992 that we didn't know 20 or even 10 years ago? Is there any question that violence has an effect on kids—and on society at large?

In this special issue, the editors of TV GUIDE present the results of a special study on how much violence is out there, what leading experts think about its effects, and what can be done.

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HOW WE DEFINE VIOLENCE

"Any deliberate act involving physical force or the use of a weapon in an attempt to achieve a goal, further a cause, stop the action of another, act out an angry impulse, defend oneself from attack, secure a material reward, or intimidate others."

In our study, we exclude all unintended or accidental violence, as well as violence by animals on nature shows, and any violence occurring in sports.

How Much Violence?

What we found in an eye-opening study

By Neil Hickey

More televised violence than at any time in the medium's history is flowing into American homes. It's coming from many more sources than ever before—home video, pay-per-view, and cable, as well as from the broadcast networks and stations. The overwhelming weight of scientific opinion now holds that televised violence is indeed responsible for a percentage of the real violence in our society. What is new is that psychologists, child experts, and the medical community are just now beginning to treat televised violence as a serious public health issue—like smoking and drunk driving—about which the public needs to be educated for its own safety and well-being.

How much violence is there on American television? How is it more virulent now than in recent years? Where is it coming from? What are its effects? What can parents, educators, the industry, and public officials do about it?

To attack those questions systematically, we commissioned a study of one day in the life of TV—and convened an expert panel whose comments begin on page 12.

To snap our day-in-the-life-of-TV photo, we enlisted the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonprofit monitoring company whose business is fashioning statistical portraits of how American society is depicted in the media. We asked for and received a nonjudgmental, bias-neutral content analysis of one typical day of American television.

During 18 hours (6 A.M.-midnight) on April 2, 1992, in Washington, D.C., the center taped, tabulated, computerized, and analyzed the programs on 10 channels: the affiliates of ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox and PBS; one non-affiliated station, WDCA; plus the cable channels WTBS, the USA Network,

MTV, and HBO. The program schedules, it turned out, were notable only for their ordinariness: no untypically violent movies like "Rambo" or "Scarface" were shown; even the news on that date was light on violent events such as wars, civil disorders, and local crime. The results of the study were an eye-opener. In those 180 hours of programming, we observed:

A total of 1,846 individual acts of violence; 175 scenes in which violence resulted in one or more fatalities; 389 scenes depicting serious assaults; 362 scenes involving gunplay; 673 depictions of punching, pushing, slapping, dragging, and other physically hostile acts; 226 scenes of menacing threats with a weapon.

Newer program forms like music videos and reality shows, it turns out, are significantly increasing the amount of violence on our screens. And commercials for violent theatrical movies and TV series have become a major source of televised violence.

News broadcasts, in their heightened competitive fervor, are peddling strong doses of murder, muggings, and mayhem as ratings-getters.

In fictional programming alone, we found more than 100 violent scenes per hour across the 10 outlets studied. Well over a third of all the violence (751 scenes) involved some sort of life-threatening assault. Cartoons were the most violent program form, with 471 scenes.

(A note: child experts agree that violent cartoons are inadvisable for very young children, 2 to 5, who may not distinguish between animated violence and the real thing, so they were included in our tabulations. Also, our study shows a glut of superhero-style cartoons that feature more "human" characters than earlier Tom & Jerry type fare; these realistic cartoons may have an even stronger influence on children.)

Promos for television shows were next (265), then movies (221), toy commercials (188), music videos (123), ads for theatrical films (121), TV dramas (69), news (62), reality shows like *Top Cops* and *Hard Copy* (58), sitcoms (52), and soap operas (34).

The outlet purveying the most violence on that particular spring day was the unaffiliated station: 376 scenes, or one every three minutes. The rest of the list:

WTBS—321 scenes (18 per hour)
HBO—257 scenes (14 per hour)
USA Network—209 scenes (12 per hour)
MTV—202 scenes (11 per hour)
Fox—182 scenes (10 per hour)

CBS—175 scenes (10 per hour)
ABC—48 scenes (three per hour)
NBC—39 scenes (two per hour)
PBS—37 scenes (two per hour)
(WTBS's high total is partly explained by a high incidence of Tom & Jerry-type cartoons and old movies and TV series.)

Unmeasured in our survey, of course, were the many hundreds of hours of VCR-watching that went on in that city on that day—much of it devoted to theatrical films with violent content.

Thus, the study's conclusion: violence remains a pervasive, major feature of contemporary television programming and it's coming from more sources and in greater volume than ever before.

Cause

There's no shortage of major studies on the effects of televised violence. Among them: the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1968); the Surgeon General's Report (1972); the National Institute of Mental Health's (1982); and the U.S. Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence (1984). The NIMH states the consensus: "Violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs..."

One of the most ambitious and conclusive studies (conducted by Dr. Leonard D. Eron and others) examined a group at ages 8, 19, and 30 in a semirural county of New York State. The

findings: the more frequently the participants watched TV at age 8, the more serious were the crimes they were convicted of by age 30; the more aggressive was their behavior when drinking; and the harsher was the punishment they inflicted on their own children. Essentially the same results emerged when the researchers examined another large group of youths for three years in a suburb of Chicago. And when they replicated the experiment in Australia, Finland, Israel, and Poland, the outcome was unchanged: as Dr. Eron

states it, "There can no longer be any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime, and violence in society. The evidence comes from both the laboratory and real-life studies. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socioeconomic levels, and all levels of intelligence."



Photographs by Adrian DeLucca for TV Guide

THE EXPERTS SPEAK OUT

TV GUIDE's Panel: 'The New Face of Violence on TV'

To learn the latest, the best, and most authoritative thinking on the subject of violence on television, TV GUIDE invited a blue-ribbon panel of experts (see opposite page) to convene in New York before an invited audience in the auditorium of the Center for Communication, a nonprofit media forum which cosponsored the event. Neil Hickey, senior editor of TV GUIDE, was the moderator. A transcript of the panel's remarks, edited for space, follows:

TVG: Let's start off with a brief quote

from a 1992 survey by the American Psychological Association called "Big World, Small Screen." It says: "Since 1955, about 1,000 studies, reports, and commentaries concerning the impact of television violence have been published....The accumulated research clearly demonstrates a correlation between viewing violence and aggressive behavior—that is, heavy viewers behave more aggressively than light viewers." Any comment on that?

SLABY: Yes, the research does show that television violence is a contributing cause to violence in our society. Years of research evidence has gone into establishing television violence as a contributing cause—and the word "cause" is not used lightly by scientists.

GERBNER: Television, in my opinion, is one of the factors, but to attribute the violence in our society to television alone is a form of scapegoating—considering that we have growing joblessness and an undeclared civil war in our cities. Violence is used as a solution to problems by people who otherwise cannot get ahead or get attention.

Also, television trains us to be victims. Our studies, as confirmed by

many independent investigators, show that the most pervasive, long-term consequence of growing up in a media cult of violence is a sense of pervasive insecurity, what we call "the mean-world syndrome." It's a sense of feeling vulnerable, of dependence, of needing protection.

And children's television programming on the weekend is saturated with violence. The number of cartoon programs has increased over the last three years from 31 to 40 and our research shows that the amount of violent acts per hour has risen from 25.5 in 1988 to 32 last year. That's an all-time high.

TVG: Senator John Glenn, during hearings on youth violence-prevention in March of this year, said, "The United States is the most violent 'civilized' country in the world." Let me also quote briefly from Dr. Prothrow-Stith's book *Deadly Consequences*: "Just as our nation has more violent crime than any other industrialized nation, so too is our popular culture more violent than that of other countries.... In the media world, brutality is portrayed as ordinary and amusing."

PROTHROW-STITH: I think that the impact of television violence is small on most of us, but it's quite large on some of us. And I agree that it's one of the factors, particularly among urban poor children who don't have male role models countering the television superhero who's solving problems with violence.

TVG: Dr. Leonard Eron of the University of Illinois said recently in testimony before Congress that there is no longer any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime, and violence in society, and he estimates that fully 10 percent of the actual violence in our society is attributable to the viewing of violence on television.

WEINMAN: But I think the first thing we need to do is define what we mean by

THE PANEL

Peggy Charren
President, Action for
Children's Television

George Gerbner
Dean-emeritus, Annen-
berg School of Communi-
cation, University of
Pennsylvania

Rosalyn Weinman
VP of Broadcast
Standards and
Practices, NBC

Dick Wolf
Television producer
(Law & Order,
Miami Vice)

Ronald Slaby
Senior scientist, The
Education Development
Center, and lecturer,
Harvard University

**Deborah
Prothrow-Stith,**
M.D.
Harvard School of
Public Health

John Leonard
Television critic,
CBS Sunday Morning,
New York magazine

Panel photographs by
Marc Bryan-Brown for TV GUIDE



"television."

TVG: This symposium, for good reason, is called "The New Face of Television Violence." And we're defining "television" as anything and everything that comes through the television screen into the home, from whatever source: the networks, local stations, cable, premium channels, pay-per-view channels, direct broadcast satellites, laser disc players, videocassette players. There's the violence on news programs and music videos. The new courtroom television channel televises live the trial of Jeffrey Dahmer, with the most lurid descriptions of his bestial acts.

WOLF: I hate to be the fly in the ointment here, but I've seen a lot of research over the last 15 years, and to say that the case is closed on the effects of TV violence is incredibly misleading.

WEINMAN: That's right, there isn't really a consensus, and there's actually very little violence on ABC, NBC, and CBS.

CHARREN: How about cable?

WEINMAN: Cable is a different subject.

TVG: The network's Standards and Practices departments, headed by people like Dr. Weinman, cut out a certain amount of violence. Most other program providers do not. Dr. Aletha Huston, co-director of the Center for Research on the Influence of Television on Children at the University of Kansas, testified before Congress that "...cable and videotape recorders...have altered our television experience drastically....Children and adults have easy access to R- and X-rated films, many of which contain very graphic, explicit violence."

CHARREN: But even if you can prove that TV violence has an effect on causing you to be more aggress-

sive, what are you going to do about it? I have taken the position for 24 years that, yes, it has an effect, but in a democracy you still shouldn't censor it. So not being a researcher, I don't care whether it has an effect or not.

GERBNER: Well, I *do*. And not only do I care whether it has an effect, but I care about trying to characterize accurately this new age into which our children are born. There has never been a situation like this. They are born into homes in which the TV set is on seven hours a day. They start viewing as infants. Most of the stories they hear are not told by the parents, the school, the church, or neighbors. They are told by a handful of conglomerates who have something to sell. That has a powerful effect. An average of six and eight acts of violence—physical, overt violence, hurting or killing people—per hour in prime time. In Saturday children's programming, between 20 and 25 acts of violence per hour. There's never been the type of expertly choreographed brutality that we have at the present time. And what we're dealing with is a kind of pollution that we have to understand and take care of, and let's not deny it.

LEONARD: Look, this culture has always been an extremely violent one compared to European nations. The cult of the frontier, the cult of the superhero, have been part of our popular literature. I'd like to point out that the only country in the world that watches more television than the United States is Japan. The programs are surprisingly violent. The Japanese movie industry is the major distributor throughout Asia of rape and snuff films. And yet all this watching of television and all this emphasis on violence doesn't have the effect of murder and mayhem in the

Japanese culture that it does in our country.

It's not TV that's killing people. It's guns and drugs and cuts in federal aid to big cities, and we've allowed our public school system to degenerate. We throw away portions of our society, and that they should respond with violence makes sense. I noticed the week after all that violence in Los Angeles that for the first time I was seeing very interesting and heretofore unknown black people on my TV screen talking about aspects of the society that I'd never heard about. Violence did one thing. It got those people onto the TV screen for the first time.

GERBNER: We did a comparative study and found that Japanese violence, unlike ours, is not happy violence. It's painful, it's awful, it teaches a very different lesson.

WOLF: I want to put something in perspective here. Violence as entertainment has been around as long as we have. The ancient Greeks had it. People have wanted it from the Middle Ages, from the Romans to Milton, Shakespeare, and everybody else. "Hamlet" is one of the most violent stories ever conceived. We can get into all kinds of psychological claptrap about why people enjoy watching drama that has life-and-death effects. The real problem here is—I have an 8-year-old and a 5-year-old child. They've never seen any of the shows I've ever produced. They shouldn't be watching them. They're not allowed to watch Saturday-morning cartoons.

PROTHROW-STITH: Why not?

WOLF: Why not? Because they're extremely violent.

PROTHROW-STITH: Do you think it has an impact on them?

WOLF: I don't know. But I don't think that 5-year-old little girls should

"If you let them, children will rent from the video store the worst bloody stuff."

—Peggy Charren

be watching superheroes beat the c— out of people. The issue here is, when are you going to stop blaming the media and recognize that parents are supposed to monitor what their children are watching? When you blame television in a society that is the most violent on earth, that has taken the six-shooter and made it an object of erotic desire for 150 years, to claim now that it's television that is setting people on this course from the time they were born, is unrealistic.

GERBNER: This is argument by setting up straw men to knock them down. We were very careful to point out that we are not blaming television alone. And the notion that, sure, there is violence in fairy tales, there is violence in Shakespeare, and therefore we shouldn't be concerned about it is a powerfully misleading notion.

We have to make a distinction between violence that is selectively used, violence that is handcrafted to show its tragic consequences, to show the pain and to show the suffering and the tragedy that follows. That's not what we're talking about. We're talking about mass-produced, cheap, industrial violence that's injected into every home



"There's never been the expertly choreographed brutality [on TV] that we have at the present time."

—George Gerbner

whether they like it or not. That is an entirely new phenomenon. It's not like Shakespeare, it's not like fairy tales. And that is the critical, or at least the most troublesome, aspect of the situation.

CHARREN: Let me say that this is a price you pay for freedom of speech and diversity of TV sources. We now have cable, we have home video, we have fiber optics coming with 200 channels. When you have that kind of diversity, you're going to get some stuff that's terrible. If

you let them, children will rent from the video store the worst bloody stuff that ever hit the market. It's all very well and good to talk about this incredibly violent culture that we have, but I don't know how we can make all of this stuff coming onto our screen completely benign. You have a lot of new sources feeding us, some of which are bad, some of which, like CNN and C-SPAN, are very good.

SLABY: Beyond all else, television is a teacher. We know that, because advertisers pay several billion dollars a year in order to get the teaching effect and to sell their products. It's such an effective teacher, and it's teaching the wrong message to young children.

"[To combat TV violence] we need to use health education, the same way we did with smoking."

—Deborah Prothrow-Stith

produced. If you can cheapen the product, you don't need to have the most popular programs and you can still make money. Violence is a cheap, industrial ingredient. It reduces time for writing.

WOLF: I don't know who you've been speaking to, but that is absolutely fallacious. The most expensive form of entertainment ever devised is the one-hour television drama. To say that people who make fictional dramas are putting violence in because it's cheaper is just untrue!

GERBNER: It's profitable to put on violence instead of other, more diversified, creative solutions to problems which require more talent, more time, and more money. Violence is a formula that's relatively cheap to inject into programs.

PROTHROW-STITH: Let me move to another aspect—to the different way we think of sex in the media versus violence in the media. Do we know that a 5-year-old watching intercourse is going to be harmed in some way? No, we don't know that. There are no causal relationships established. Yet we make sure, as best we can, that sex is not portrayed to our children. We don't do that with violence. People are making money off of violence

TVG: In that connection, Dr. Carole Lieberman, who is chairperson of The National Coalition on Television Violence, has pointed out that since everybody agrees that *Sesame Street* can teach the alphabet, why don't TV people admit that children can learn the ABC's of murder and mayhem from gratuitously violent entertainment?

GERBNER: The fact is, most highly rated dramatic programs are nonviolent. Then why is violence produced? I'll tell you why it's

and are callous about it, and I think we need to start calling some people to task.

WEINMAN: There are responsible people at all three networks who are not callous. That's why we have in place a set of guidelines that deal not only with sex but, very specifically, with violence. One of the seminal, important issues we deal with every day is, how do you find a balance between sanitizing violence and sensationalizing it?

TVG: In view of those guidelines, I'd like to know how the interaction works between Dr. Weinman and Mr. Wolf. Dr. Weinman's job is to review Mr. Wolf's scripts for objectionable content before they get on the air. Now, he is a producer of very, very successful television programs. In effect, he's an 800-pound gorilla.

WEINMAN: Nine hundred, this year.

TVG: OK, 900. So he comes to you and says, "Look, if you take this violent scene out, you'll ruin my show! I'm going to have you fired!" What happens then?

WOLF: Let me answer, because it's very interesting. I think that what's instructive is that Roz and I have never failed to reach agreement, that there have obviously been spirited discussions—very spirited discussions.

WEINMAN: Very late at night.

WOLF: Very late at night, very early in the morning. It goes on and on. And some episodes have taken literally weeks to get into shape for broadcast approval. My feeling is, if you're going to show someone being shot, then show them writhing on the ground in pain, see them in a hospital three days later, still writhing in pain. Don't make it glamorous.

GERBNER: Remember that much of the revenue for TV and movies comes from outside the United States. And in the trade, the slogan is, "Violence travels well, humor doesn't." Violence

doesn't need much explanation, and therefore, from the point of view of global marketing, is an excellent commodity and highly profitable.

TVG: Dr. Prothrow-Stith, you mentioned in your book that children in inner cities watch more television because they have little money to do anything else, the streets are dangerous, and there are fewer recreational opportunities.

PROTHROW-STITH: I think one of the things that came through quite clearly in the Los Angeles revolt was that teens have learned that if you think you have a cause to justify, violence is the way to do it. When characters like Rambo get angry, they blow people away. So children have learned that violence is the way to solve problems. And the challenge I would put to the TV industry is to show, in an appealing way, how people can solve their problems and achieve success nonviolently.

TVG: That doesn't tend to happen much in big-hit theatrical movies, which everybody agrees are the most violent in the history of the film industry. A *New York Times* movie critic counted 74 dead in "Total Recall," 81 dead in "Robocop 2," 106 dead in "Rambo III," and 264 dead in "Die Hard 2." [Earlier this month, an accused serial killer of six women in New York State said he was copying scenes in "Robocop 2."] All those movies show up in home video.

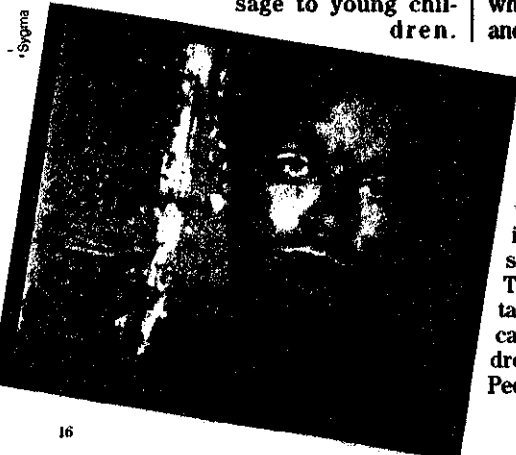
PROTHROW-STITH: That brings up liability by the filmmakers or networks, and that's a can of worms—establishing a copycat, causal relationship.

TVG: Meaning a victim could sue a broadcaster, you mean. But so far that argument has been rejected by the courts.

What about the copycat issue in a situation like the Los Angeles riots, where people saw what was happening, and joined in?

"How do you find a balance between sanitizing violence and sensationalizing it?"

—Rosalyn Weinman





GERBNER: I think Ted Koppel was right, for once anyway, when he said that live, unedited telecasting of the Los Angeles riots spread the virus from one part of the city to another. I think it was done in a reprehensible way. The lesson for broadcasters in such situations is to be very careful about live, real-time telecasting of violent scenes.

CHARREN: There's a point to be made about the looting that went on in Los Angeles and how that relates to television. The advertising that interrupts most TV programs conveys the message that everybody can afford these products. But most of those inner-city people can't. And a lot of those people who looted stores were not reacting to the Rodney King tape, but were saying, "Where is it written that I can't have all these things that television tells me I need, but which I can't afford?"

WOLF: The desire for objects advertised on television is much more destructive to children and adolescents than it is for adults. And the children's shows on Saturday morning are too violent and that's something that has to be corrected, but I don't know how you do it. Not leg-

"[My children] have never seen any of the shows I've produced. They shouldn't be watching them."

—Dick Wolf

islatively, because that's censorship.

TVG: I want to ask Dr. Weinman about the NBC series *I Witness Video*. When it came on NBC last February, it showed a replay of murders that had been captured on tape by amateur camcorder operators. We wrote about it in TV GUIDE at the time, saying, "For the first time in TV history, a major network started programming death as entertainment." How about that, Dr. Weinman?

WEINMAN: It doesn't relate to my department. That's a program that is produced by NBC News. I think the whole question about tabloid, reality-based programs is a whole other issue.

TVG: Yes, and they are a new and very popular program form—series like *America's Most Wanted*, *Inside Edition*, and *Top Cops*.

WEINMAN: The only good news is that very few kids watch those kinds of programs.

TVG: As popular as some of those new reality shows are, what does it say that almost all the top shows—*Roseanne*, *Murphy Brown*, *Cheers*, *Home Improvement*, *Designing Women*—are comedies and thus almost entirely nonviolent?

LEONARD: Well, I'd like to see Dr. Gerbner do a study—similar to his violence profiles—on how much hugging there is on TV. Hugs are all over prime time, in these family comedies, perhaps far more than they are in our own families. Yet we're not more peaceful, as far as I can tell. We have to talk about all of TV. We surf, we pick and choose. We want to laugh sometimes, and we want violence and quick solutions other times.

WOLF: Picking up on Roz Weinman's point about standards and practices, three years ago, several producers, myself among them, were approached by a net-

work—specifically, NBC—and asked whether we wanted them to disband the standards and practices department. I was quite vehement about it. No, I didn't want that, because for better or worse, I don't want that responsibility. And I don't consider it censorship. I consider it a business decision, and a way to make sure that the product has the most chance of staying on the air.

TVG: But is everything related to TV violence done merely for a business reason? Is there a moral issue involved here, or is everything just economics and money?

WOLF: I think that most producers of shows that have survived have a kind of internal moral gyroscope, so that they are not just catering to the basest instincts of the audience. This isn't bread and circuses.

CHARREN: The thing is, censorship would be terrific if I made all the decisions about what goes on and is taken off. I'm trying to put through a media-literacy merit badge for the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. It's a way to teach kids that the violence you see on television is not the solution to problems.

GERBNER: Well, there is another law on the books, which may or may not provide an opportunity, and that's Senator Paul Simon's bill, the Television Violence Act. What it does is provide an exemption for the networks and cable companies for a period of three years from any prosecution under the antitrust laws if they agree to some kind of self-regulatory mechanism pertaining to violence.

TVG: Yes, but Senator Simon made a speech on the Senate floor on June 30 lambasting the networks for not taking advantage of the Television Violence Act. And he said that he continues to get statements from TV-industry people insisting that television violence doesn't do any harm.

"The crime is: TV has potential that it's not using to solve the problem of violence."

—Ronald Slaby

LEONARD: I don't want to see a three-year exemption so that the networks can get together and decide how they're going to handle these problems. I don't want anything more that looks to me like censorship, no matter whether you call it business decisions or whether you call it taste. I think violence and sex and political dissent are all in bed together, and if you start messing

with one, you end up messing with the rest of them. We already have too many gentlemen's agreements that have, in effect, wiped out political dissent.

PROTHROW-STITH: Why is violence the only area where we have no such agreements?

LEONARD: We do, all the way along, in little ways. And this is what happens when people get together and decide what the country needs to be protected from. It's exactly the same thing that's wrong with political correctness on too many college campuses. I don't think anybody should get together and say, "Here's how we can work it out."

TVG: Yet another source of TV violence, and a fairly recent one, is music videos. Dr. Prothrow-Stith has written that "the subjects of heavy-metal songs are sex, violence, death, Satan, and alienation." She adds that "in rap song after rap song, young black men brag about owning guns, using guns, and killing." There aren't any studies showing cause-and-effect with music videos, but what do you advise?

PROTHROW-STITH: My favorite strategy is the strategy of making that sort of thing unpopular, as we did with smoking and drunk driving. We said: we want the TV industry to help, through sitcoms and other shows, to teach our children that this is bad and dangerous behavior. So I think we can make violent music videos unpopular. People recog-

nize that the music itself is nice, upbeat, kind of bopping music. The lyrics, though, are often horrible.

TVG: On another front, the National Coalition on Television Violence puts out a monitoring report occasionally, and the most recent one says that the most violent network shows—for the spring of 1991—were, in order: *Young Riders*, *The Flash*, *In the Heat of the Night*, *Black Jack Savage*, *Top Cops*, *MacGyver*, *America's Most Wanted*, *American Detective*, *DEA*, *Hunter*, and *Unsolved Mysteries*. All of those had 20 or more violent acts per hour, and *Young Riders* had 55. But let's ask the question: should anything be done to lessen gratuitous brutality, murder, and mayhem on television, from whatever source: networks, cable, home video? Do the broadcasters' rights of free speech on the public-owned airwaves supersede the public's right—and desire—for some modicum of protection?

CHARREN: We can educate children, we can educate parents. We can have seminars like this. We can try to help parents understand something that this panel has tried to articulate, namely that it's important for parents to pay attention to what their children watch. I sometimes tell parents: suppose a complete stranger came into your home carrying two bags—one containing a lot of products for sale, and the other a lot of

stories. And he said to you, "You look tired. Why don't you just leave, and I'll talk to your kids here on the couch." How many of us would say, "Go right ahead?" You have to help parents understand that that box in the living room is not always a friend of the family.

SLABY: In its listings for the premium cable channels like HBO and Showtime, TV GUIDE tells you if a movie is violent. That can help parents decide which movies to watch and which not.

GERBNER: That's good for highly educated, upper-middle-class parents who control the set. Most parents do not look at either ratings or advisories.

SLABY: I did a quick count of the premium cable movies listed last week in TV GUIDE. Over half of them were labeled "violence." So we're talking about the really new look, the new face of media violence.

PROTHROW-STITH: I think that the media can expect that the public may come around to demanding the same regulations for television as are in place for other professions. You wouldn't want doctors and hospitals to be unlicensed and unregulated.

CHARREN: But the potential for closing down free speech in this country from ideas like this—liability for speech—is so horrendous that I'd rather put up with the violence on television.

PROTHROW-STITH: Well, there is a middle ground, and if we reach it without censorship, we'll be in a lot better shape.

CHARREN: There's almost no information-based programming for kids on commercial television in this country, and it's the biggest blot on the landscape of American broadcasting that ever was.

TVG: What does that have to do with the problem of violence on television?

CHARREN: We could use that kind of program to help kids understand what televised violence really is. Television should also stop putting on

the air as promotional announcements the most violent 30 seconds of upcoming movies and miniseries. And running those promos adjacent to children's shows. It's an industry problem.

TVG: Some experts say schools should teach that real violence actually hurts, that there's no such thing as violence without consequences.

PROTHROW-STITH: Yes. Television certainly isn't telling 12- and 14-year-olds shooting each other to death in our cities that death is permanent, final, tragic. We had a young man in the emergency room at Boston City Hospital who was surprised that his gunshot wound hurt. And I thought, boy, he's really stupid, anybody knows that if you get shot it's going to hurt. But it dawned on me that what he sees on television is that when the superhero gets shot in the arm, he uses that arm to hold onto a truck going 85 miles an hour around a corner. He overcomes the driver and shoots a couple of hundred people while he's at it.

It's important, I think, to differentiate the kind of violence you see in movies like "Boyz N the Hood" and "The Killing Fields" and "Glory," where you are saddened by it, and where the pain is obvious, where there are consequences to the violence.

WOLF: I agree with you. I'd go further. Dr. Weinman and I occasionally have arguments because, when I depict violence on a show, my desire is always to show it much worse than the network or the advertisers have any desire to see it. If somebody gets shot, they should be writhing on the ground screaming in pain, with gallons of blood running out of them. We're not allowed to show that. I agree that if you show violence, show it the way it is, do not glamorize it.

TVG: Another problem seems to be that women are too often the victims in

"I don't want anything more that looks to me like censorship."

—John Leonard

TV scenes of violence. Some people argue that violent TV is written almost exclusively by white males, and that men—not necessarily women—want violent entertainment.

GERBNER: Many years of study have led me to the conclusion that broadcasting policy is held very tightly by a handful of men impos-

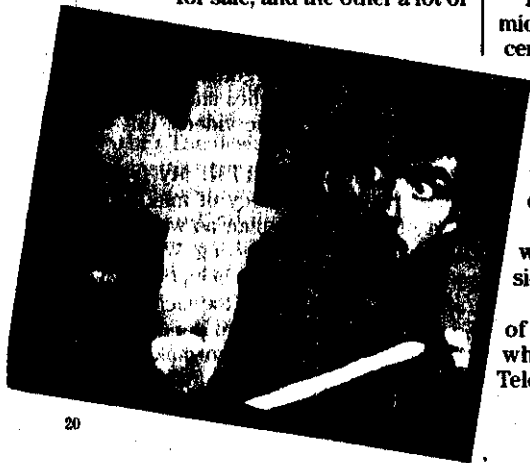
ing rather strict controls. If there is only one thing I would say to do, it is—hire more women, both on screen and off. And the minute you do that, the world will begin to change and be more fair, more just and less violent.

As it is, there is an unwritten policy that is very consistent, that is highly prejudiced, that encourages violence and victimization on a very unequal scale, showing certain people—mostly women and minorities—as more vulnerable.

WEINMAN: But we hope there are times when we actually put programs on which enlighten on this subject and do more than entertain; for example, "The Burning Bed." By and large, what you see on television and in the movies is basically what people are interested in watching, and these are cultural reflections.

PROTHROW-STITH: But we treat violence and sex very differently. We have no evidence that watching sex does any damage to children, and yet we go on and on about the sexual content of television and movies, and about regulations relating to sex.

We protect our children from a variety of things via regulatory mechanisms, and I think we need to do some protection in the area of violence—particularly of those children whose parents aren't able to or don't do it. And I think that if the industry, particularly the networks, continues to be as sensitive as they have been to this problem, and if that spills over into the movie industry, we'll be success-



ful. When it's unpopular, it won't make money.

LEONARD: As someone who actually watches a lot of TV, I think prime-time commercial TV has been more responsible than other parts of the culture. It's been the miniseries and TV-movies about date rape, child abuse, alcoholism, AIDS—and not movies or newspapers or schools—that have done the most to air these issues. But the best kind of education on TV won't do any good in a terrible home environment. We begin as always with providing bread and jobs, then a culture begins to create grander cultures in its imaginary forms. That's where I would begin.

GERBNER: Yes, education is very important, but it's like saying there are problems in our environment, so let's teach children to wear gas masks, and maybe not to breathe too much. It's not enough.

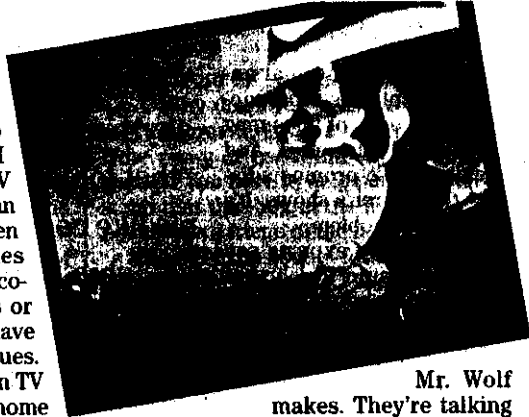
PROTHROW-STITH: You've got to have policy that protects people and you've got to have education to help them deal with the situation. What changed our attitude about smoking? It was education in the classroom. It was working with the media. We banned the advertising of cigarettes on television.

TVG: How does that relate to media violence?

PROTHROW-STITH: We have to use health education, relating to violence, in the classroom—the same way we did with smoking. We have to use the media to deglamorize violence, and to show that nonviolence can be productive.

SLABY: I was going to say that one thing that resonates with me is the rather sad commentary that Dick Wolf says his children aren't allowed to watch any of the programs he has made, or even any of the Saturday-morning programs.

WEINMAN: But critics aren't coming down on the kinds of productions



Mr. Wolf makes. They're talking about slasher movies kids are renting at the local video store, and, more and more, the pay-per-view button that gets similar material. HBO shows uncut movies at 8 at night as well as 11 in the morning.

GERBNER: I want to urge parents to participate in children's viewing, so they know something about what they criticize. They shouldn't use TV as a form of punishment or reward because that teaches indiscriminate viewing. I think teaching critical viewing should be a central task in our schools.

SLABY: I think public education on violence through TV is the missing ingredient. All of us would agree there's a great deal known about media violence. There are good suggestions on how to teach the public about guns, alcohol, drugs—and their relation to violence. The media can play a major role, consistent with other public-health areas.

I think that we American citizens would like to see the television industry—including cable and independent producers—pull together with researchers, and all of us get together and solve this problem once and for all. Certainly, Congress is calling for the industry to solve it. And I think the American people are calling for us to solve it. The crime is that TV has such potential that it's not using to try to solve this problem of violence. And I would like to see that happen in the next decade.

SUMMING UP: WHAT WE CAN DO

The American Psychological Association suggests four steps parents can take:

- 1) Watch at least one episode of programs the child watches to know how violent they are.

- 2) When viewing together, discuss the violence with the child: why the violence happened and how painful it is. Ask the child how the conflict could have been solved without violence.

- 3) Explain to the child how violence in entertainment is "faked" and not real.

- 4) Encourage children to watch programs with characters that cooperate, help, and care for each other. These programs have been shown to influence children in a positive way.

OTHER POSSIBLE STEPS

- Urge the broadcast, cable, and home video industries to adopt a unified ratings system of advisories to parents, labeling programs and movies as to their violence content.

- Urge TV and cable industry executives to take full advantage of The Television Violence Act, permitting them to work collectively toward reducing media violence.

- Make TV violence part of the public health agenda (as with smoking and drunk driving), publicizing—through a vigor-

A FEW MODEST PROPOSALS TO MITIGATE, MODERATE, AND MINIMIZE THE EFFECTS OF TELEVISED VIOLENCE ON VIEWERS

ous public information campaign in all informational media—its perils and effects.

- Establish courses in "critical viewing skills" as a regular aspect of school curricula, to help young people become more discriminating viewers.

- Inquire of elected officials their views and policies on televised violence; and then vote accordingly in November.

- Promote passage of a law requiring that, eventually, all new television sets be

time-channel lock circuitry allowing parents to "lock out" channels and programs containing high levels of violence.

- Support the resolution of the American Psychological Association urging the broadcast and cable industries "to take a responsible attitude in reducing direct, imitable violence" in live-action children's shows and "violent incidents on cartoons." ■

TO OUR READERS

What are your reactions to violence on TV today? How do you react to the arguments and conclusions in this special issue? Send us your opinions. We'll publish a sample of our readers' views in an upcoming issue. Write to: TV GUIDE/Violence, P.O. Box 4822, New York, NY 10185-0041. Or fax us: 212-819-3738. Responses must be sent by September 1.