

# THE CONTEXT OF TELEVISION VIOLENCE

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I am delighted to be here this evening and to be invited to make the second Carroll Arnold lecture. It is an honor to follow David Zarefsky who last year talked about the state of public discourse. This year I want to examine television violence.

The debate about media violence has followed the history of media in this century as well as the history of our field. I wish to acknowledge my colleagues on the National Television Violence Study from whom I have learned much and with whom I am privileged to work: at Texas, Wayne Danielson,

Nick Lasorsa and Chuck Whitney; at UC-Santa Barbara: Ed Donnerstein, Joel Federman, Dale Kunkel, Dan L~~inz~~, Jim Potter and Barbara Wilson; at Wisconsin-Madison: Joanne Cantor and at North Carolina: Jane Brown and Frank Biocca. In addition there are more than two dozen graduate students around the country with whom we have worked. This is truly a collaborative project and one which resides in a particular historical context. Tonight I take as my theme just this notion of “context” for our understanding of television violence.

In these remarks the notion of “context” of violence has multiple meanings: I want to talk about the social and cultural context for the current round of criticism and inquiry into television violence. Second, the National Television Violence Study monitoring of television is premised on the notion that not all television violence is the same—that the context of a violent act or portrayal is crucial to distinguishing among portrayals—and so I will engage in a discussion of how the context of violence varies across the television landscape. Finally, I will address the particular political and public policy context within which this project is situated and the upcoming policy decisions concerning potential remedies for television violence.. That context matters and how it matters is the overarching theme I want to talk about.

Let me say at the outset that I consider myself to be a non-violent person. I am not particularly radical in that belief, but I prefer non-violence to violence by the same token that I prefer reasonableness to irrationality or peace to war, or life to death. I concede that there are times at which violence may

be necessary but I do not find violence preferable to non-violence. As a critic of violence on television, I am not absolutely opposed to showing violence in all instances. That is far too narrowing, for some televised depictions of violence do have educational or social value. The crux of my concerns is not so much with the fact of violence, always, but with the quality of violence as depicted on television today. However, because I am also a firm believer in free speech and the First Amendment, I am apt to argue for more responsibility from industry, and for public and government expression of concern in order to hold the industry to account.

Let me try to unfold an analysis of the state of violence on television in America, and its interplay with real violence in our world. In short, I want to set the stage on which television is projected. I will say this again and again: context is important. The context in which violence takes place, or is viewed, matters dearly.

As Americans, we live in a violent society. We have always lived in a violent society. Indeed, America celebrates the outcome of a democratic revolution, which like all revolutions was at least for a time inseparable from a certain accepted violence. To have stood the ground at the bridge in Concord as a Minuteman and fired the shot heard round the world was to be cast into history as a hero. That germinal violence leading to the birth of our nation provides the benchmark against which we may contrast other violence in American history and differentiate between degrees of violence and American morality.

All violence is not the same. Any violent episode or era will reveal a complex set of causes, effects, means and ends buried within it. My entire generation, for example, was indelibly shaped by the violence of the 1960s. We witnessed JFK and RFK and MLK and Malcolm X all gunned down while images of violence in the streets of Newark, Watts, Chicago, Detroit and elsewhere played into our view of the world, never to recede from it. The Vietnam war was our living room war.

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In trying to sort out human behavior, the significance of surrounding, or contextual, factors is unavoidable. Circumstances surrounding acts of violence deserve extra attention. Moral, legal, religious and social issues, and sometimes mitigating facts, are bound within the specific context in which human beings act under life's real terms. This is evident across contemporary American experience. Contextual concerns framed the trial of Lt. Calley and his role in the My Lai Massacre, the beating of Rodney King by officers of the LARD (and the trial and riots which followed), or the prosecution of a wife who kills her abusive husband. A framework, part reality and part 'morality, surrounds each

picture of violence extracted from the real world. In any event, these frames are nearly always essential for the pictures themselves to be comprehensible.

What startles us completely about some violence is its entirely extraneous nature: the shooting spree of a Charles Whitman atop the University of Texas bell tower, or the random mayhem in a Scottish schoolroom. The utterly unreal nature of such extreme violence leaves us gasping and groping. It leaves us with a fear, for it is a violence that fits no frame, no intelligible explanation.

In the past 15 or so years, a remarkably cavalier, vicious, wanton and senseless pattern of violence entered society and the American psyche. Drive-by shootings and gangbanger crimes, fueled by a trade in handguns and crack cocaine, ushered in fears of an epidemic of violence we may not fully comprehend. The violence panic of this time, unlike that of the 1960s, seems much more to surround children and youth, as both the victims and the perpetrators of violence.

When hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur was shot to death in Las Vegas in Fall, 1996, sadly enough, many people weren't surprised. After all, he was a successful, pure product of a deadly culture. Reverend Jesse Jackson made this comment: "Sometimes the lure of violent culture is so magnetic that even when one overcomes it with material success, it continues to call. He couldn't break the cycle." Shakur died as he lived, walking the walk, talking the talk, of violence glamorized.

That cycle of violence has helped us become the most violent industrialized nation on the earth. A lot of numbers gird that conclusion. But the numbers that tell the most tragic story concern children and adolescents:

- Among young people in the age group from 15-24 years old, homicide is the second leading cause of death and for African American youth murder is number one.
- Adolescents account for 24 percent of all violent crimes leading to arrest. The rate has increased over time for those in the 12-19 year old age group, while it is down in the 35 and older age group.
- Every 5 minutes a child is arrested in America for committing a violent crime; gun related violence takes the life of an American child every three hours.

• A child growing up in Washington DC or Chicago is 15 times more likely to be murdered than a child in Northern Ireland.

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What could account for this? Most of us generally accept the notion that violent behavior is a complex, multivariable problem, formed of many influences. Racism, poverty, drug abuse, child abuse, alcoholism, illiteracy, gangs, guns, mental illness, a decline in family cohesion, a lack of deterrents, the failure of positive role models. . . all interact to affect antisocial behavior. As Rowell Huesmann has argued: aggression is a syndrome, an enduring pattern of behavior that can persist through childhood into adulthood.

In simple terms, violence may be less mysterious than some think. I only suggest this rhetorically, for of course, I have few doubts that violence is nothing if not insidious and intractable in many ways. But consider the context not of one act of violence, but of the persistent fact of violence.

Violence pays. Only violence pays. In those three words Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist, political theorist and revolutionary summarizes a lesson from history all too familiar to oppressed classes. The simple utterance, violence pays, is a lesson straight from life itself: we live in a world shaped by the exercise of power where violence itself is

the most extreme form of power. In Fanon's analysis, historical colonialism informs the oppressed that the oppressor's violence is, if not justifiable, then at least lucrative, as a means to gain and hold power. Fanon's "wretched of the earth" dream of the riches to be gotten by revolution, a counter force to the experience of colonial oppression.

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Violence pays. It certainly does—at the box office, for Hollywood and New York movies and television. Moreover, violence has helped make American entertainment products the second largest export of this nation. Violence is a staple, in particular, of movies that attract adolescent males. PG-13 and R-rated movies serve to attract such boys like forbidden fruit, with their conflation of action-adventure-guns-sex and excessive, explicit graphic violence wielded by powerful heroes. This violence resides in a context different from portrayals of violence as a last ditch effort to escape an impending harm.

Violence in the media may not be the most important contributor to violence in the real world but it is surely one of the multiple, overlapping causes. Social scientists first began studying media violence in the 1920s, and evidence of a causal relationship between media violence and real violence has been accumulating for at least 40 years. The Centers for Disease Control, the National Academy of Science, the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association—all have exam-

ined violence in our society and traced these connections. Today, we find wide consensus among the experts that, of all the factors contributing to violence in our society, violence on television may be the easiest to control, the most tractable.

The National Television Violence Study, with which I'm associated, is the most comprehensive scientific assessment yet conducted of the context of televised violence. As an indication of the scope of the study, in its first year of monitoring television in the 1994-95 season, we analyzed about 2500 hours of television programming, including more than 2700 programs; we sampled television programs across 23 cable channels during the TV season. This is the largest, most representative sample of television ever examined using scientific content analysis techniques.

We began with two goals:

One, to identify the contextual features associated with violent depictions on television.

Two, to analyze the television environment in-depth in order to report on the nature and extent of violent depictions. We focused, in particular, on the relative presence of the most problematic portrayals.

**‘Why contextualize TV violence?** Because we understand that all violence is complex. The problem isn't round like an orb, it isn't monolithic; an act of violence is one tile in a mosaic.

Violence on television is presented in many different forms and settings. In some cases, heroes may be rewarded for acting violently as when the central authority-figure on a police show shoots a murderer, while in other cases, violent characters may go unpunished. Violence may be depicted without much attention to the pain and suffering (both immediate and long-term) for victims and their families; a gunshot wound, for example, may be shown in close-up without elaborating on the agony, physical pain, or often debilitating effects of gunshot wounds when people survive them. Or, conversely they may show that violence causes pain and suffering for the victim, the victim's family, and the community. Anti-violence themes may be embedded in the overall narrative of a program that contains violent acts as a part of the message. Or, we may see multiple acts of violence depicted in such graphic ways as to suggest that shooting to kill is another of life's mundane aspects, a

banality, to be approached with indifference or even humor. In short, violence on television is contextualized in so many different ways that we believed the time had come for a thorough examination of these contexts in which depictions of violence are presented.

First, we had to define violence. Violence is defined in our study as any overt depiction of the use of physical force—or credible threat of physical force-intended to physically harm an animate being or group. Violence also includes certain depictions of physically harmful consequences suffered by an animate being or group as a result of unseen violent force. It is important to note that with this definition we kept our focus on acute physical aggression directed against living beings. I believe this is a conservative definition of violence. I believe we could have widened it to focus on psychological aggression or acts of nature as some other studies have done.

The contextual factors we examine in portrayals of television violence are derived from the previous effects research literature. These context variables include pain/harm cues, the nature of rewards and punishments, graphicness of portrayals, the presence of guns and weapons, the attractiveness of the perpetrators and targets, the presence of humor, and the degree to which violence is fantasized or realistic. These characteristics of violent portrayals have all been found to differentially influence the effects of such images on viewers, particularly children.

When looking at the entire body of existing effects research, as we did, you find three major effects of televised violence 1) viewers learn the aggressive attitudes and behaviors depicted in the programs they see (known as the learning effect); 2) prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward real violence and real victims, which may result in callous attitudes and a decreased likelihood that desensitized individuals will take action to help victims when real violence occurs (the desensitization effect); and 3) viewing violence may increase our fear of being victimized, leading toward self-protective behavior and an increased mistrust of others (the fear effect).

This past February we released our report of the 1994-95 television season. We found violence on TV does indeed vary by context.

• Violence is a predominant theme on television. However, some genres, police shows, tabloid news shows and movies, for instance, are more violent than others. Other reality-based shows and comedies are not so violent. While more than half of all the programs we studied contained at least some violence, one-third contained more than nine violent interactions and each violent interaction may itself consist of numerous individually violent acts.

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• In most cases the perpetrator engages in repeated violence. More than half of the violence (58 percent), is committed by characters who engage not in isolated acts of violence but in a pattern of repeated aggression.

• Warnings about violence on TV are almost nonexistent. Among the programs that contain violence in the 1994-95 season, only 15 percent are preceded by any sort of advisory or content code. Most of these are placed on movies. Other genres, including children’s programs with substantial amounts of problematic violence, rarely include a warning label.

• Television violence often involves the use of a gun. In one quarter of violent interactions a gun is used and presentation of visual cues such as the image of a weapon tend to activate aggressive thought in viewers. These later serve to

facilitate aggression or act as cognitive filters to influence the interpretation of neutral events as possibly threatening or aggressive.

• On television, perpetrators go unpunished. In about three quarters of all violent scenes, the perpetrators get away with what they’ve done. One of the clearest findings of this study is that the world of television is not only violent—it also consistently sanctions its violence. The message: violence pays. A very high proportion of violent scenes lack any form of punishment for the perpetrators. This is troubling, and our concern is exacerbated by the finding that this pattern is consistent across all channel types and all genres.

• The consequences of violence are often not realistically portrayed. Less than half of television’s violent interactions show the victims experiencing any signs of pain. Only about one in six programs depict any long-term negative consequences such as physical suffering (limping, the wearing of bandages, or other evidence of a prolonged effect), or financial or emotional harm.

• Violence is often presented as humorous. More than a third of all violent scenes involve a humorous context, trivializing or undermining the seriousness with which violence ought to be regarded.

• Violent programs rarely employ a strong anti-violence theme. With as much violence as there is on television, you might think that a reasonable portion of it would stress an anti-violence message. Only 4 percent of all violent programs do so. This represents a huge missed opportunity for television to counter-balance the more common depictions that show violence as attractive, effective, and socially acceptable.

Those are our findings from the 1994-95 television season which we released in February of this year. We are currently analyzing the 1995-96 season and will release new findings in winter 1997.

The February report-by coincidence-was released the day before President Clinton signed into law the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Indeed he mentioned our findings at the bill signing to underscore the V-Chip clause of the 1996 Act.

That raises yet another set of contextual concerns. The entire monitoring

project we are conducting is situated within a particular political and historical context: monitors were urged on the broadcast and cable television industries in 1994 by Congress and the President. That was an extraordinary step in a series of government policy initiatives regarding television violence that began in 1990 and will continue to unfold over the next few months. Let me trace some of those steps:

The 1990 Children’s Television Act (the first piece of federal legislation regarding children’s television in our nation’s history) asked the major broadcast networks to find a way to voluntarily limit the amount of violence on television, and to do so by 1993. Essentially the law put aside anti-trust rules to allow the networks to deliberate.

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By summer of 1993, it became clear that ABC, NBC, CBS and Fox had not met-even once to discuss the issue. Senator Paul Simon of Illinois then held hearings in LA and in Washington later that fall during which he castigated the industry for not voluntarily reducing violence. Most remarkably, the hearings gave voice to social science researchers who had concluded that television violence is a social problem, if not a public health problem, and that the television industry has a responsibility to do something about it. The Clinton Administration supported our call for self-regulation by the industry.

During the summer of 1994, both the cable television industry and the broadcast networks hired independent monitors to provide an annual assessment of violence on television for the American people. The National Cable Television Association hired our group, the NTVS, and Jeff Cole of UCLA was hired by the four major broadcast networks. Both Cole's report (which is released annually in the fall) and our report (released later in the winter) are thus the result of government pressure on the industry.

However, public pressure did not let up after monitors were hired. Throughout 1994 and 1995, bipartisan criticism of media violence was picking up steam: President Clinton's 1995 State of the Union address deplored media violence and then Senator Robert Dole criticized media violence later that spring when announcing his candidacy for president. And the recurring public and government criticism of television violence, slasher films, rap music and violent videos, turned up at least weekly, if not more often, in the press and on Capitol Hill. Clearly, the industry's hiring of independent monitors alone was not enough to quell public concern over media violence, violence bashing has become a way for political liberals to insert themselves into the family values argument that had been the province of the political and religious right.

During that period, Congress was developing the landmark Telecommunications Act that would outline the nature of government regulation in the new landscape of digital communications. By the time the Act passed and became law, on February 7, 1996, it contained the requirement that all television receivers made after February 1998 must contain a V-chip or "violencechip"—a blocking device that parents can use to filter out programs with objectionable violence, language or sexuality. However, in order to activate the blocking device, programs must be rated by some system that will help parents identify which programs contain objectionable features.

At the end of February, President Clinton held a summit with television industry executives who agreed to develop this ratings system to be used in conjunction with the V-chip. Jack Valenti, head of the MPAA, along with Eddie Fritts of the National Association of Broadcasters and Decker Angstrom of the

National Cable Television Association are heading the industry ratings group.

This group should be reporting,

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within the next month or so, their suggestion for a ratings system, a system that will then be reviewed by the FCC and most likely put into effect within the next year, before the V-chip comes on line.

The V-chip and the ratings system it requires, are coming under considerable scrutiny. No one is quite sure how the whole system will work. What shows will and won't be rated (the industry has said it will not rate news or sports)? Will the ratings system be a prescriptive, age related system like the film industry's G, PG, PG-13 and R ratings? Or will it be a more descriptive system that describes the actual content on the air (e.g. no violence, mild violence, graphic violence)? Public advocacy groups prefer the latter,

but Mr. Valenti and the industry and their advertisers prefer the less-descriptive, letter-coded ratings. Who will rate the shows? Each network, some industry wide group, or outside raters?

Those are questions of implementation, there are also many questions about the effects of this system. Will the V-chip actually be used by parents to block objectionable programs for children? Or will it just sit there unused, like the flashing clocks no one sets on so many VCRs? Will the existence of such a rating system affect advertiser support for the production of more daring, adult television programs that risk receiving negative ratings? Or will the ratings system have a boomerang effect and lead to even more graphic and explicit violence on some television shows just because the individual broadcaster no longer has to exercise social responsibility? And will the presence of a V-chip and ratings system excuse the industry from providing more advisories and anti-violent messages on violent programs?

I have no doubt that the next few months and even years will see more not less public discussion of television violence and how our society can and should deal with it. It is within this context that the television monitoring project was initiated and will continue. As communication researchers, we will have great opportunity to provide evidence regarding the ways in which programming will be affected and how the V-chip and ratings system will be used by families. Indeed, there is considerable research to be done as a consequence of the enactment of public policies regarding television violence.

But, will this technological fix, the V-chip, put to rest the public's concern about television violence? Will it affect, at all, the nature of violence in American life? These are important questions about which I can only speculate, but which are the real and important business of moments like this. So let me speculate:

First, I predict that the V-chip won't settle the debate, and may only marginally alter the television landscape. Why? Because the chip offers a technological fix—a limited fix—to a large and complicated human, moral, and social problem. Hollywood movies didn't become less violent after a ratings system was installed. It's clear that parents want a more helpful and descriptive warning la-

bel on violent television than a simple age-based code.

At the same time, parents and children will need more than a television blocking device and a code to navigate the television landscape. I predict that educators and parents will increase the demand for more information and education about media, so that we'll be able to use the chip intelligently and know what we're filtering out or in. We have an appalling lack of media education in this country; indeed the United States is the only English-speaking nation in the world without media education in its public schools. Media education is desperately needed in order to develop more literate audiences. And a literate viewership, I suggest, is necessary for any technological fixes to be effective.

Second, I believe that violence in the media won't abate until the industry producing these portrayals A) understands the effects of media violence, B) admits that what it produces does contribute to real violence, and C) demonstrates greater responsibility by moderating the violent nature of its programming. Once a ratings system is in place, the television industry cannot walk away from the debate. They will have to constantly examine, question and be willing to explain the sort of violence being portrayed. If not all violence is the same, as we've shown, and some portrayals are more harmful than others, then producers, writers, directors and programmers have a responsibility, I believe, to try to show violence in the least harmful manner. But this will require the industry to move beyond the position that violence on TV does no real harm, that it does not contribute to real world violence. We know it does.

Third, I predict there will be increasing opportunities for communications researchers to work with the industry, to share our knowledge and help create less harmful programming. We can't expunge violence altogether from dramatic and reality-based TV, since violence is, after all, a very true dimension of human existence. But we can suggest ways in which television can be socially responsible in portraying the realities of violence. I predict-I hope-we will have many chances to do that.

In conclusion, let me return to the theme of my remarks tonight and see if I can't extract at least a few hard-gained kernels of optimism from this whole troubling business. This lecture is but a window in the context of ongoing work. The point of our research isn't to condemn; but to discover and learn, and ideally to teach. Television has value. Television proves its value by the many good programs produced every year.

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Television shows need not be sanitized or insipid, they need not be all smiley-faced or falsely optimistic about the worlds they depict. All we should hope for is that they be more honest, truthful, realistic, and sensitive to the very impressionable young minds upon whom television has such a great effect. Which is to say, I do hope they will become less sensational and stop glamorizing violence, stop making it seem as if violence is an ordinary and acceptable human response to a difficult world.

At the very least, we need television which elevates and celebrates a more refined sense of justice-justice based on reason instead of revenge, on laws instead of guns, on deliberation instead of impulse, and finally, which holds perpetrators of violence accountable for their actions. Let me add my voice to those calling upon the television industry to

be accountable for its actions--to **OWN**-up to the role it has played in lowering the threshold for real violence in our society.

Let us imagine a television industry so responsible that its dramatic depictions of violence serve to repel viewers from ever committing Violence, rather than seducing them into acting on dangerous fantasies, or leaving them with over-heightened anxieties and fears. Let us imagine television working harder to portray violence, suffering or inhumanity accurately in context, to put it in proper historical or social perspective. Some portrayals of violence can be so powerful, so hideous, but so moving, that they stop us and make us think deeply about ourselves as a people. The movie "Schindler's List" comes to mind. I would rather that movie actors spill stage blood than leave any new generation ignorant of the devastation of true violent epochs and run the risk of reliving history.

I return to Fanon's lesson: violence pays. We must devalue violence and teach our children that no, indeed, it does not pay. We must devalue it and teach them that violence is not a valid currency for ordinary exchange; it doesn't get us where we need to go; it is a last resort, only a means of mere survival, and even then, it has grave consequences.

The power of television in modern life is clear. To quote Edward R. Murrow: "This instrument can teach. It can illuminate. Yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box."

I disagree -television also holds the power to harm, to instill fear, and to render us callous to suffering. It can bring ugliness into the world.

We are at a moment in which the television industry and the future members of that industry we educate can influence the moral climate of television production. This is the context of today's debate and context matters.

What an honor this has been, I thank you very much.