

DEADLY CHOICE: VIOLENCE OR ALCOHOL  
Uses and Abuses of TV Ratings

By George Gerbner

The much-ballyhooed television program rating game is on. Signs like TV-G, TV-PG, TV-K and TV-M have been flickering on the upper left corner of your screen since January 1, 1997. If you haven't noticed, you're in good company. The movie-style rating system is an uninformative scheme that deceives the public and protects industry from parents rather than the other way around.

If you have been puzzled about what these "advisories" mean, or lax about following them, or slack about providing parental guidance when you see TV-PG flashed on the screen, or just blinked and missed it, don't feel bad. That is just how the rating system is supposed to work.

The Chicago Tribune reported on March 18, 1998:

"Yes, the hodgepodge of letters and numbers, instituted by the television industry under pressure from Congress and parent-advocacy groups, has been both ignored and derided since its debut in January 1997 and refinement last fall.

"One recent study, conducted by the Associated Press, found that 7 of 10 adults were paying it little or no mind. Many major newspapers, including this one, have not been publishing the ratings in their television programming guides.

"Parents at a congressional hearing in Peoria last spring ripped into the original ratings, which only labeled shows movie-style, based on recommended ages for viewers. When the rest of the industry agreed after Peoria to add content indicators to the age-based ratings, the most popular network, NBC, refused to do so.

"But all of that has a chance to change with the news last week that the FCC has given the ratings ... official seal of approval..."

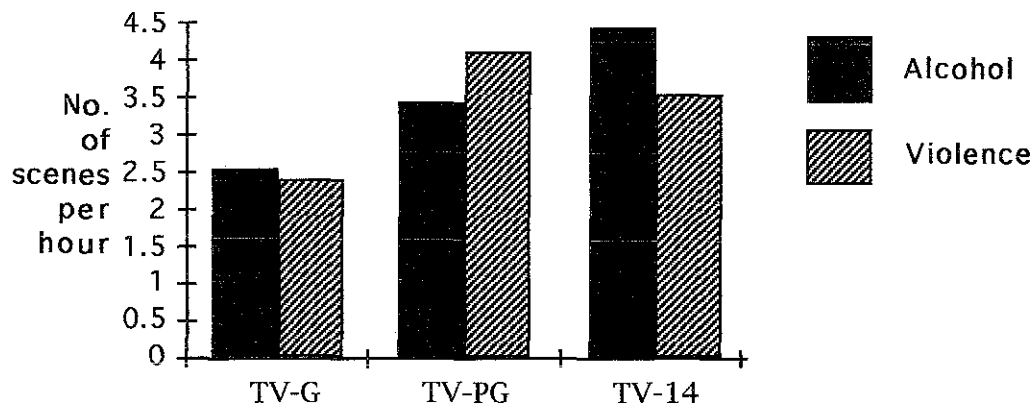
Well, fat chance. Most parents don't know about the ratings, or don't use them, or, if they did, don't know what they're getting instead. In any case, they assume that broadcasters, rather than the public, own the airways and that they air whatever is most popular.

Wrong again.

Mindless TV violence is not an expression of artistic freedom or of any measure of reality or popularity. On the contrary, it is the product of a *de facto* censorship: a global marketing formula and rating system imposed on program creators and foisted on the children of the world.

The political process that rammed through the business-as-usual rating system was orchestrated by Mr. Jack Valenti, President of the Motion

Figure 1. AVERAGE NUMBER OF ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE SCENES



However, TV-PG rating increases the frequency of alcohol scenes to 3.4 per hour, and TV-14 rating increases the frequency of alcohol scenes to 4.4 per hour. There is more alcohol than violence in the most violent shows.

Table 1. AVERAGE NUMBER OF ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE SCENES

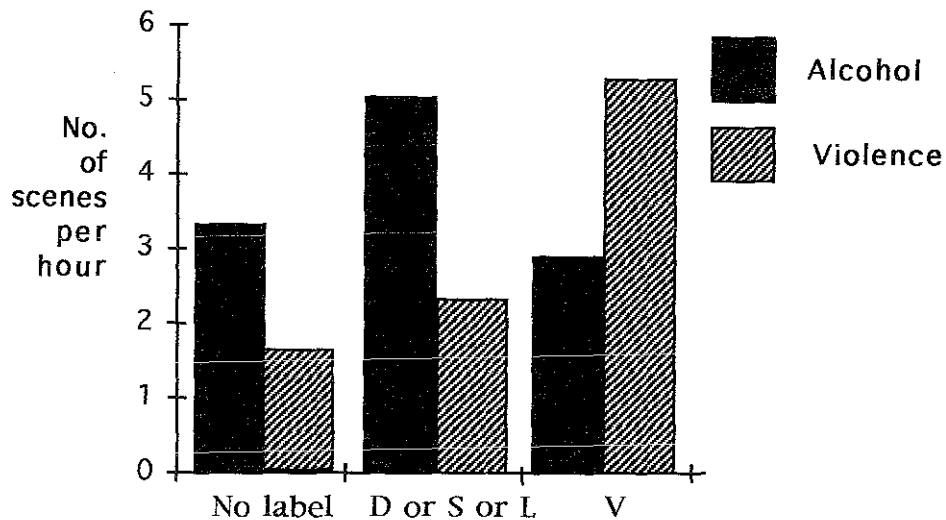
Rating label	TV-G	TV-PG	TV-14
% of sample with rating	18%	64%	18%
Alcohol scenes per hour	2.5	3.4	4.4
Violence scenes per hour	2.4	4.1	3.6

If age-grading is a mixed bag, content labeling has its problems as well. In response to lobbying by citizen action groups throughout 1996 and 1997, content labels are used in the ratings of most network programs. Shows are marked for violence (V), language (L), sex (S), and adult themes (D).

Prime time dramatic programming with a "V" label present scenes of violence every 11 minutes, compared to every 38 minutes for shows without any content label.

In Figure (2) and Table (2), shows are grouped into those with no content label, those with D or S or L (but no V), and those with the V (violence) label. (NBC, which initially opted out of content labelling, is not represented.

Figure 2 ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE SCENES BY CONTENT LABELS



It can be seen that depictions of alcohol on prime time appear to be coupled with adult themes, adult language, and sex.

Table 2. ALCOHOL AND VIOLENCE SCENES BY CONTENT LABELS

	Content labels (none)		V
% of sample with label	41%	30%	30%
Alcohol scenes per hour	3.3	5.0	2.9
Violence scenes per hour	1.6	2.4	5.3

What shall we make of all that?

Our children are growing up in homes where television tells most of the stories. Before they go to school, which used to be the first time they encountered the larger culture, they are integrated into a television view of the world. That is not the view of parents, schools, communities or even countries. Neither is it the view of creative people with something to tell. It is the view of a handful of conglomerates with something to sell.

That radical change has altered the socialization of children, transformed the mainstream of the cultural environment, and surrendered the public airways to a marketing operation. Paying for all that is a markup for all advertised goods and services, a form of taxation without representation.

Our Cultural Indicators (CI) research project has monitored and analyzed the world of prime time and Saturday morning television since 1967. This report about some features that ratings are supposed to reflect is taken from that database of more than 3000 programs and 34,000 characters.

Humankind may have had more bloodthirsty eras, but none as filled with *images* of violence as the present. We are awash in a tide of violent representations the world has never seen. There is no escape from the massive invasion of colorful mayhem into the homes and cultural life of ever larger areas of the world.

We found prime time television saturated by an average of five scenes of violence per hour. Over twenty scenes of violence per hour fill Saturday morning cartoon programs.

Violence, whether serious or humorous, is essentially a demonstration of power. It shows who can get away with what against whom.

The ratio of violence to victimization defines the price to be paid for committing violence. When one group can commit violence with relative impunity, the price it pays for violence is relatively low. When a group suffers more violence than it commits, the price is high. In general, women, children, young people, lower income, disabled and Asian Americans are at the bottom of the television violence "pecking order."

We have also found that those who watch more television in every group express a greater sense of apprehension, mistrust, and insecurity than do light viewers in the same groups. We call this the "mean world syndrome." Whatever real dangers lurk outside people's homes, viewing violent television cultivates fears and dependencies that make some groups more vulnerable than others to exploitation and victimization. Ultimately, therefore, marketing mayhem contributes to domination and repression.

Ratings cannot alleviate the human, social, and political fallout of the "mean world syndrome." Can they at least keep viewers from flocking to violent programs? Wrong once again. Another well kept secret is that violence on television is not popular. Many studies have found that even though audiences are desensitized to violence, they don't like it. Our CI project has documented the fact that violence depresses the Nielsen ratings.

Why, then, all that violence? Here is the final secret, and challenge to conventional wisdom. What drives violence on the airways is not popularity but global marketing. This is how it works.

What you see on TV is not what the people want. What you see is what the advertisers think will attract an audience at the least cost. "Cost per thousand" is the unit of measurement, where the size of the audience is divided by the dollar cost of the time the advertiser pays to insert the commercial message. Viewers are the fish, programs the bait.

Production costs are climbing above what domestic advertising markets can support. Producers and syndicators reach for the global market.

What is the dramatic ingredient best suited to the global market? It is one that needs no translation, that is image-driven, that speaks "action" in any language, and that fits into any culture. That ingredient is violence.

What global programmers may lose domestically by saturating programs with violence, they more than make up by selling it cheap to many countries. When you can dump a Power Rangers on 300 million children in 80 countries, shutting out domestic artists and cultural products, you don't have to care who wants it and who gets hurt in the process.

What shall we do?

Media watch groups, children's and parents' advocates, and other public interest organizations should make their voices heard on the real issues. They are issues of gender equity and general diversity in media ownership, employment, and representations. They are issues of marketing-driven media monopolization, homogenization and globalization. In the last analysis, let us not get bogged down in rating system trivialities. Citizens own the airways. We should demand that it be healthy, free, and fair, and not just "rated."

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For further reading:

#### Books

*Invisible Crises: What Conglomerate Media Control Means for America and the World.* With Hamid Mowlana and Herbert Schiller (eds.) Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996.

*Violence and Terror in the Media: An Annotated Bibliography.* With Nancy Signorielli. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1988.

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"Stories That Hurt: Tobacco, Alcohol and Other Drugs in the Mass Media." In *Youth and Drugs: Society's Mixed Messages*. OSAP Prevention Monograph-6, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 1990.

"Violence and Terror in the Mass Media," *Reports and Papers in Mass Communication*, No. 102. Paris: Unesco, 1988.

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