

**VIOLENCE IN CABLE-ORIGINATED TELEVISION PROGRAMS**  
**A Report to the National Cable Television Association**  
by

**George Gerbner**  
**The Annenberg School for Communication**  
**University of Pennsylvania**

How much violence is there on dramatic television programs that cable companies produce? The short answer is that cable-originated children's programs have substantially less violence than can be seen on broadcast networks; some other (especially "action") programs have more violence. The overall Violence Index is about the same on cable-originated as on broadcast network programs.

The research that reached these conclusions and its full findings can best be interpreted in a context that places the cable industry in a comparative perspective and focuses on the purposes of this study.

### **Comparative Perspective**

A child is born into a home in which the television set is on an average of seven hours a day. Viewing is an integral part of the family's style of life and leisure-time habits. Most of the programs typically come from broadcast television. They are watched just by turning on the set and tuning it to a program on one of the few broadcast channels available. No further decision or selection is necessary, or, in many cases, possible. The choices are limited. The more viewers watch the more of all available types of programs they must see, and the less selective they can be. Regular viewers of broadcast television, and their children, can hardly escape recurrent features of the world of television such as violence.

Cable, on the other hand, presents at least three levels of choice. First, the family must make a conscious decision to receive basic cable programming, and must pay to receive it. About 6 out of 10 American households have made that choice. (A specific unwanted basic cable channel can even be "locked out" by a "parental lock device" available from cable operators.)

Secondly, if a family wishes to subscribe to a premium cable service, it must make further deliberate decisions and selections. Some premium networks use the Motion Picture Association's rating system and other advisories to guide viewers. Premium television subscribers are unlikely to find themselves unwittingly exposed to programming for which they did not ask or pay.

Finally, unlike broadcast television, cable is a highly diversified industry with many specialized channels and

potentially hundreds of choices. Viewers can select and watch specialized cable channels of their selection as long as they like without encountering programs or features they did not wish to see.

Levels of choice and selectivity are closely associated with legal and social responsibility. In the total orchestration of cultural materials, print offers the largest number of different independent sources and thus the widest choice. The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects that diversity. The protection accorded to the sources and the diversity of choices places the primary responsibility on the selector. Broadcast television, on the other hand, operates on scarce radio frequencies and can offer only a limited number of sources and fewer choices. That is why it is a government licensed trusteeship. The law charges broadcast license holders with primary responsibility for programming that serves "the public interest, convenience, and necessity."

Some cable channels operate virtually like electronic magazines while others are closer to -- but not identical with -- broadcast television. The higher levels of decision-making and selectivity involved in cable viewing places more responsibility for choosing on the viewer. Nevertheless, the cable industry's recognition of its share of responsibility for what goes into American homes, and especially for the most popular entertainment programs it produces, prompted the National Cable Television Association (NCTA), in consultation with its Satellite Network Committee, to commission this independent study.

### The Study

The study was conducted by the Cultural Indicators research team at The Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania. The director of the study is the originator of the Cultural Indicators project, and co-principal investigator (with Profs. Larry Gross, University of Pennsylvania; Michael Morgan, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; and Nancy Signorielli, University of Delaware) of the Violence Index employed in this study.

The Violence Index is an ongoing effort of the Cultural Indicators project initiated by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969 and supported by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, the National Institute of Mental Health, the White House Office of Telecommunications Policy, the American Medical Association, the U.S. Administration on Aging, the National Science Foundation and other organizations.

Violence was defined as clear-cut and overt episodes of physical violence -- hurting or killing or the threat of hurting and/or killing -- in any context. Annual week-long samples of broadcast network dramatic programming have been analyzed since 1967. The sample included films and other dramatic programs shown on television (action, comedy, drama), and children's cartoon and other dramatic programs. "Dramatic" was defined as fictional programs with a storyline or plot. "Cable-originated" was defined as those programs, including feature movies, in whose production cable networks had a substantial financial interest.

Videotaped programs in the samples were screened and coded by trained analysts using an extensively tested instrument of analysis. The instrument requires the reliable observation by independent coders of many aspects of all programs and characters in the sample. Detailed descriptions of methodology can be found in prior reports listed in the Bibliography.

#### The samples

The cable program sample assembled for this study consisted of tapes of cable-originated dramatic programs supplied by 11 of the largest cable networks. The time period selected for the sample was the weeks of October 20, November 3 and November 10, 1991. The total cable sample consisted of 198 programs and 107.6 program hours. The comparison sample of prime time and weekend daytime (children's) dramatic programs of the three major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) consisted of 94 programs and 54.8 program hours that had been taped off the air as part of the Cultural Indicators project.

The request for the taped cable samples was made after many of the programs had been aired and all programs advertised so that programming could not reflect anticipation of this study. Inquiries to cable networks confirmed that no special circumstances interfered with making the samples representative of programming in general. Published program logs were reviewed to ascertain that cable-originated programs shown during the sampling period were included in the sample. A list of networks and programs included in the sample is in the Appendix.

A survey of the largest broad-based basic and premium cable networks that show any dramatic programs found that cable-originated dramatic productions comprised 4 percent of all weekly hours and 6 percent of prime time hours of their total schedules.

## Why cable-originated programs?

Cable-originated dramatic programs make up a small but significant part of the most popular and widely watched entertainment programming, including children's dramatic programs. It is the part created by the cable industry, and, therefore, the part for which the industry recognizes a special responsibility.

This study focused on cable-originated programs for two additional reasons. First, most dramatic programs seen on cable can also be seen on broadcast channels, in movie theaters, and on video. Cable plays no part in their creation. The analysis of the main body of such programming is already available in the periodic Violence Index reports of the Cultural Indicators project.

Secondly, isolating cable-originated programs helped focus more sharply on what cable contributes to the already existing dramatic media mix. The key question to which this study sought the answer was: what difference does cable make, with specific reference to violence?

The support and cooperation of the National Cable Television Association (NCTA) and the Satellite Network Committee made this study possible. Results and interpretation are the sole responsibility of the project director. For assistance and coordination, credit is due to Mariaelena Bartesaghi, Kristen Conrad, Cynthia Kandra, Amy Nyman and Nejat Ozyegin.

## Results

The detailed results of the study are in the Tables that follow this report. They are presented for cable-originated (CO) programs and for the three major broadcast networks (BC) combined.

Table 1 presents the comparative figures for children's and "general" (all other) CO and BC programs. Table 1A contains comparative data about "basic cable" networks only, with "premium networks" (HBO, Showtime, Disney) excluded. (All other Tables present findings for all cable-network originated programs.) Tables 2 and 3 divide the "general" category into "action" (crime, adventure, western), "comedy" (including sitcoms and skits), and "drama" (all other dramatic programs) for CO and BC programs.

The Violence Index (bottom line of each Table) combines measures of the prevalence and rate of violent acts and characterizations. (The components of the Index are also shown separately in the Tables.) The purpose of the Index is to facilitate overall comparisons. It shows that CO

children's programs were less violent than BC children's programs (196.0 compared to 244.2) but CO other ("general") programs were more violent than BC prime time programs.

The 1991 CO "general" programs Index was 169.2; the prime time BC network programs Index was 141.7. Although the CO score for 1991 was higher than BC score for the same year, the CO score was within the range of prime time BC network program Index scores for the past 10 years. (That range extends up to 181.1.)

A comparison of Tables 1 (all CO programs) and 1A (basic CO programs, excluding premium networks) shows that while most violence figures for basic only were slightly lower than for all CO programs, the differences were not significant. In other words, as far as cable-originated programming is concerned, the premium networks do not contribute significantly to violence on cable.

The combined Violence Index including both children's and other programs was slightly higher for CO programs (171.8) than for BC programs (169.6); a non-significant difference.

#### Children's programs

Figures in the first columns under Cable and Broadcast in Table 1 summarize the results. There was some violence in 76.9 percent of CO children's programs and in 82.5 percent of BC children's programs. The number of violent acts was 5.2 per program and 17.3 per hour in CO but 7.8 per program and 32.0 per hour in BC children's programs. CO children's programs were, on the whole, longer than BC children's programs. Larger number of shorter cartoons filled with violence accounts, in part, for the fact that BC children's program hours were about twice as saturated with violence as CO children's program hours.

Less than half (46.3 percent) of all CO children's program characters but more than half (55.6 percent) of all BC children's program characters committed violence. Victims of violence (usually more numerous than perpetrators) were even more likely to be found on BC children's programs: 74.4 percent compared to 55.6 percent on CO children's programs.

#### "General" programs

This category deals with all dramatic programs other than children's programs. Almost 7 out of 10 (69.9 percent) CO "general" programs and a little more than 7 out of 10 (74.1 percent) BC "general" programs contained some violence. However, the frequency of violence per program and especially per hour was substantially higher in CO than

in BC programs. While violence in BC programs occurred an average of about 3 times per program and 4 times per hour, violence in CO programs occurred an average of about 5 times per program and 9 times per hour. Violent characterization were also about 10 percent higher and victimization nearly 20 percent higher in CO than in BC programs. Killing on CO programs is almost twice as frequent as on BC programs. The specific sources of these findings can be seen in Tables 2 and 3 (CO and BC, respectively), and will be discussed by the different genres shown on those tables.

#### Action, comedy, and other drama

As might be expected, "action" (crime, adventure, western) programs are the sources of most violence. None is without violence. All measures of violence and victimization are higher than in the other genres, and are higher in CO than in BC programs. The greatest difference is in the frequency of violent acts per program hour. CO action programs feature an average of over 16 acts of violence per hour compared to about 10 in CO comedy and about 6 in CO drama. BC action programs present about 7 violent incidents per hour compared to 2.4 in comedy and 3.7 in drama.

These comparisons indicate that the second highest saturation of violence is in CO comedy. That appears to be an artifact of the many short comedy skits (including parodies, slapstick, etc.) in the CO sample. In fact, however, CO comedy programs have fewer violent characterizations than BC comedy programs and a substantially lower Violence Index (85.5 to 103.4).

Regular dramatic programs are, therefore, the second major sources of both CO and BC violence. About 8 out of 10 dramatic non-action, non-comedic programs contain violence in both CO and BC samples. The number of violent acts is also comparable, between 5 and 6 per program. CO dramatic programs, however, have a larger proportion of violent characterizations than BC programs (48.3 compared to 38.3 percent). These characters also claim more victims and inflict more lethal violence.

#### Summary

Cable-originated children's programs were less likely to contain violence than those produced by broadcast networks. Although nearly 77 percent of cable-originated children's programs still had some violence (compared to 82 percent on broadcast networks), they included only about half as many violent episodes per hour as did broadcast children's programs.

Other cable-originated dramatic programs were more likely to be violent than were prime-time broadcast network programs, though they fell within the 10-year range of such programs. Premium networks do not contribute significantly the cable-originated violence. Most cable-originated violence came from action programs, with regular dramatic programs second.

A comparison of the overall Violence Index for cable and broadcast programs in our sample shows that cable-originated programs do not add substantially to the level of violence in dramatic programs produced by other sources.