

# “The Gerbner Violence Profile”—An Analysis of the CBS Report

THE CULTURAL INDICATORS RESEARCH TEAM

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The CBS report deals with two of three areas of the annual Violence Profile. It discusses the Violence Index and the Risk Ratios showing relative levels of victimization. . . .

Organized in logical order, the CBS report focuses on four main criticisms:

1. The Violence Index is deficient because (a) it defines violence too broadly and (b) it is composed of “an arbitrarily weighted set of arbitrarily chosen measures of violence on television, whose meaning is totally unclear.”
2. The Violence Index employs faulty units of analysis because “It counts as multiple acts of violence, single incidents which should be counted as single incidents.”
3. A single week’s sample is inadequate for representing an entire television season.
4. “The Risk Ratio analysis is equally defective” because it measures relative rather than absolute victimization which “in all likelihood” does not correspond “to viewers’ perceptions.”

Each of these claims rests on erroneous—if convenient—assumptions and result in highly misleading conclusions. We shall analyze them in turn.

## The Index

CBS claims that the Violence Index is deficient because “It includes kinds of dramatic incidents which should not be in-

cluded—comic violence, accidents, natural disasters.” The report suggests the unlikely example of a “pie in the face,” and amplifies its conception of what *should* be included: violence “which might conceivably make potentially wayward youths wayward” and violence “in what reasonable citizens would consider to be potentially harmful dramatic forms.”

The fact is that our analysis of television content as reported in the Violence Index does not presume effects—useful or harmful. The reporting of trends in the Gross National Product, the Employment Index, or in weather conditions, cannot depend on the presumed effects of the facts being reported, be they good, bad, indifferent, or mixed. CBS confuses communications *content* with the scientific study of communications *effects* and thus ignores our study of television viewers. Yet only by studying the conceptions and behaviors of the public, rather than speculating about “wayward youths” or what seems “potentially harmful,” can one determine the actual consequence of exposure to any form of violence.

CBS would also prefer to discount all violence in a comic context, which is especially frequent in children’s programming. But CBS recently published, “They Learn While They Laugh,” a public relations booklet extolling the educational virtues of its children’s programming, including cartoons. The weight of scientific evidence, including the recent Rand Corporation research summaries compiled by George Comstock, indicates that a comic context is a highly effective form of conveying serious lessons. If CBS wants to maintain that comedy teaches only what they wish for it to teach, the burden of proof lies with them.

Overall, the Violence Index for fall 1976 shows that violence occurs at the average rate of nearly 10 incidents per program hour. Yet CBS—and other industry spokesmen—typically attack these findings by the supposedly disarming example of the “pie in the face.” First, we do not think there has been “a pie in the face” in one of our samples of TV drama in a long time. Second, the Violence Index rules specifically exclude any non-credible comic gesture or verbal abuse. We classify as violence only the credible indication or actual infliction of overt physical pain, hurt, or killing. Thus, if a pie in the face does that—which depends on the actual incident—it is violence and should be so recorded.

The contention that “serious” violence is only what “reasonable

citizens would consider harmful" is equally specious. It again confuses communication content with the assessment of effects. For example, we know from independent studies of the physical environment and of foods and pharmaceuticals that citizens are not necessarily aware of the full range of consequences of many of our industrial activities and products, including the products of the television industry. That is why independent research is needed. That is why the scientific diagnosis of a complex cultural-industrial phenomena—such as television—cannot be left to conventional wisdom, and even less to rationalizations by the corporate interests involved.

CBS also argues for the exclusion from the definition of TV violence dramatic incidents portraying "accidents," and "acts of nature." But there are no "accidents" in fiction. The author invents (or the producer inserts) dramatic disasters and "acts of nature" for a purpose. The pattern of violent victimization through such inventions may be a significant and telling part of television violence. It is hardly accidental that certain types of characters are accident-prone or disaster-prone in the world of television. Such TV content patterns may have significant effects on some viewers' conceptions of life and of their own risks in life. These patterns are, therefore, important to report if one is concerned with the full range of potentially significant consequences.

Another objection raised by CBS is that the Violence Index includes a set of measures rather than only a single indicator, and that different measures may move in different directions. The CBS report also cites an OTP Staff paper by Bruce M. Owen as complaining that the Index "involves adding apples and oranges." CBS could just as easily criticize any set of comprehensive indicators such as the GNP, labor statistics, or the weather report.

As pointed out in our response to the Owen paper (dated July 13, 1972, and also distributed through OTP but not cited by CBS), the usefulness of any index is precisely that it combines measures of different aspects of a complex phenomenon. One *must* add apples and oranges if one wants to know about *fruit*.

The Violence Index reports all its components separately as well as in combination. That has made it possible for any user of the Violence Index, including CBS, to observe the movement of each component, and to weight each as they see fit.

The CBS report correctly notes that the absolute number of violent incidents in CBS family hour programs declined in 1976, while other components of the Index showed an increase. CBS fails to discuss the nature of these other measures. It also ignores the reasons for including them in the Index. Mr. Schneider's letter further confuses the issue by claiming that the Index rose "apparently because we had the 'wrong people' involved in the action."

The *kind* of people involved had nothing to do with it. As Table 31 of Violence Profile No. 8 (to which the CBS report refers) clearly shows, 23.1 percent of *all* leading CBS family hour characters were involved in violence in 1975, compared to 31.8 percent in 1976. Even more important, violence was more broadly distributed in 1976 CBS family hour programming, making it more difficult for viewers to avoid (or have their children avoid) violence during family viewing time. While in the 1975 sample only 27.3 percent of CBS family hour programs contained violence, in the 1976 sample 62.5 percent contained violence. So, although the number of violent acts was reduced in 1976, the percent of leading characters involved in violence increased and violence was found in many more programs. Much as we emphasize with the CBS attempt to get credit for partial effort, we cannot agree that such contrary evidence should be covered up or omitted from the index.

### Units of Analysis

The CBS complaint about counting multiple acts of violence when single acts should be counted is unfounded. In the tradition of such research since the first studies of the 1950's, our coding instructions specify that a violent act is "a scene of some violence confined to the same agents. Even if the scene is interrupted by a flashback, etc., as long as it continues in 'real time' it is the same act. However, if new agent(s) enter the scene it becomes another act."

The CBS coding instructions define a violent act as "One sustained, dramatically continuous event involving violence, with essentially the same group of participants and with no major interruption in continuity." The two definitions are similar except for the ambiguous CBS qualification of "essentially." As the criteria for determining the "essential" set of agents are not specified, the CBS rule permits the arbitrary and subjective manipulation of the

unit of violence. Such ambiguity not only tends to reduce the reliability of the measure but also gives the coder employed by CBS the opportunity to stretch the rule on which all other measures depend. For example, under the CBS rule it would be possible to ignore shifting participation in a long series of violent scenes, possibly involving an entire program, as not "essential" and thus to code the whole program as a single violent incident. Such a defective measure cannot be accepted as the basis for the sole standard of network performance.

### Sampling

CBS asserts that "Dr. Gerbner only measures one week of television, which can lead to statistical errors of horrendous proportion." Elsewhere the report states that CBS research found wide variability in its own count of violent incidents.

Plausible as that claim seems, in fact it reflects the limitations, instabilities, and ambiguities of the CBS definition. Our own interest in assessing the representativeness of the one-week sample led to an initial analysis in 1969, to repeated spring-season test samplings in 1975 and 1976 and to an analysis of six additional weeks of fall 1976 programming. These studies indicate that while a larger sample may increase precision, given our operational definitions and multi-dimensional measures that are sensitive to a variety of significant aspects of TV violence, the one-week sample yields remarkably stable results with high cost-efficiency.

With respect to the number of violent actions per program (the measure of most concern to CBS) our six-week analysis found the same rank-order of the three networks no matter which week was chosen, except for one instance when ABC and CBS were tied (see Table I).

CBS claims it found that the week with the highest number of incidents on any network had 2.5 to 3 times the number of incidents of the lowest week. We found in our six-week test that this multiple was 1.98 to one for CBS; for the others, it was even less: 1.29 to one for NBC, 1.23 to one for ABC.

The explanation for the discrepancy between our results and those of CBS lies more in differences of methodology than of sampling. CBS limits its observation of violence to those acts its coders presume to be intentionally harmful and excludes the majority of

TABLE I  
Analysis of Six Weeks of Fall 1976 Programming

	Test Sample Week					F76*	Total
	1	2	3	4	5		
<b>Total</b>							
No. of programs	58	58	57	58	61	61	353
No. of violent acts	345	342	365	365	341	342	2,100
Rate (Acts per program)	5.9	5.9	6.4	6.3	5.6	5.6	5.9
<b>ABC</b>							
No. of programs	20	20	19	19	20	19	117
No. of violent acts	114	107	112	132	116	110	691
Rate (Acts per program)	5.7	5.4	5.9	6.9	5.8	5.8	5.9
Network rank	2	2	1.5	2	2	2	2
<b>CBS</b>							
No. of programs	22	21	22	21	21	24	131
No. of violent acts	90	91	130	97	66	84	558
Rate (Acts per program)	4.1	4.3	5.9	4.6	3.1	3.5	4.3
Network rank	1	1	1.5	1	1	1	1
<b>NBC</b>							
No. of programs	16	17	16	18	20	18	105
No. of violent acts	141	144	123	136	159	148	851
Rate (Acts per program)	8.8	8.5	7.7	7.6	8.0	8.2	8.1
Network rank	3	3	3	3	3	3	3

\*Fall 1976 week reported in *Violence Profile No. 8*.

violent presentations they judge to be "comedic" or "accidental." These arbitrary limitations involve much subjective speculation and introduce variability and instability leading to gross statistical aberrations.

Sharply reducing both the number and potential reliability of observations, and then limiting the analysis to a single unstable measure, do indeed lead to "statistical errors of horrendous proportion." These are the errors that our broadly-based and precisely operationalized methods are designed to overcome.

### Risk Ratios

The Violence Index reports absolute as well as relative risks. It makes clear, for example, that women are less likely to get involved in violence on television than men. But it also finds that, when involved, relatively more women than men end up as victims.

CBS claims that relative victimization (i.e. victimization compared to the commission of violence across different social types) is difficult to grasp, and is, therefore, a "meaningless statistic."

We must repeat that the validity of a TV content indicator does not depend on viewers' conscious understanding of its meaning. Our Cultivation Analysis shows that exposure to violence-laden television drama cultivates a sense of exaggerated fear and mistrust in the minds of heavy viewers. Young women—with an especially unfavorable Risk Ratio—are particularly affected, despite the fact that in absolute terms they are not as likely to get involved in violence as are the men. What CBS terms "meaningless statistic" turns out to be potentially important in its consequences.

Our analysis of the CBS report and methodology confirms the judgment of social scientists, legislators, and the general public that only a scientifically tested, independent, and comprehensive set of indicators, measuring both TV content and effects, can be the basis for judging network performance. Our experience indicates that the Violence Index and Profile provide such a set of indicators. For independent confirmation, we recommend the findings of an international panel of distinguished industry-affiliated and academic social scientists charged by the Social Science Research Council conducting a year-long investigation "to conceptualize and give scientific context to the research required for the development of a multi-dimensional profile of violence in television programming." The recommendations, published in the *Annual Report* for 1974-75 of the Social Science Research Council (pages 67-72), provide broad scientific support for the general direction and methodology of the Violence Index and Profile and offer advice which is directly opposed to the CBS methodology. A detailed study comparing the Violence Index and Profile with CBS methods will be published in the near future, providing further documentation.