



# **UCLA Television Violence Monitoring Project**

## **Part I - 1994-95**

By the UCLA Center for Communication Policy, 1995

Overview

**A summary, prepared by the Media Awareness Network, of the project's findings and conclusions on:**

Children's TV on the broadcast networks

Prime-time series

Made-for-TV movies and mini-series

Theatrical films shown on TV

On-air promotions

Other TV media

**The Projects's recommendations for:**

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## **Overview**

The UCLA Television Violence Monitoring Project, conducted by the UCLA Center for Communication Policy, is a three-year project to monitor violence on American television. The project released its first report in September 1995.

The incentive for the monitoring project came in August 1993 at a conference in California. With TV violence a hot topic, Illinois Democratic Senator Paul Simon called for an independent study. Simon

warned the U.S. networks and cable companies that they must address concerns about violence on TV, or face congressional legislation.

In June 1994, following an agreement to address the issue, Sen. Simon and the broadcast TV networks chose the UCLA Center for Communication Policy to monitor broadcast TV over the following three seasons. Parallel to this, the cable networks chose Mediascope – a non-profit media education organization – to conduct a study of violence on cable television. Mediascope's first report, the [\*National Television Violence Study\*](#), was released in February 1996.

The UCLA team monitored almost 3,000 hours of TV programming for violence during the 1994-95 season. The team looked at all TV sources including:

- The four largest broadcast networks: ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC
- The two new broadcast networks (as of January 1995): WB (Warner Bros.) Network and UPN (United Paramount Network)
- Local independent stations such as KTLA in Los Angeles
- Public television
- Basic and pay cable such as Home Box Office and The Disney Channel
- Home video rentals
- Video games delivered on TV
- Network-owned local stations
- Advertising and on-air promotions in all of the above

## **Summary of Findings and Conclusions**

### **CHILDREN'S TV ON THE BROADCAST NETWORKS**

Though children watch TV at just about any time (including programs aimed at adults), the UCLA Television Violence Monitoring Project focuses on Saturday-morning children's television shows.

It is true that people rarely die on Saturday morning TV, but they do fight – a lot. The shows send the message that fighting, if not fun, is at least the norm. It is ironic that adult programming is showing promising signs with respect to violence while children's shows continue to have serious problems.

The study classifies violence into three categories: Slapstick, Tame Combat Violence and Sinister Combat Violence.

### **Slapstick**

This is the classic approach to cartoons as exemplified by *Bugs Bunny* and *The Roadrunner*. The violence is not designed to be taken seriously by viewers. Some examples:

1. *Addams Family* (ABC)
2. *Animaniacs* (Fox)
3. *Beethoven* (CBS)
4. *The Bugs and Tweety Show* (ABC)

### **Tame Combat Violence**

The violence here usually stems from a battle between good and evil. While the *tame combat violence* is sometimes central to the resolution of the story, it is never the focus. Some examples:

1. *Alladin* (CBS)
2. *Dog City* (Fox)
3. *Free Willy* (ABC)
4. *Reboot* (ABC)

### **Sinister Combat Violence**

Shows typified by *sinister combat violence* raise the most concerns because fighting is the main attraction or focus. This is not a new genre, but the dark overtones and unrelenting combat are signs of a growing trend. These shows are mean-spirited and feature violence for the sake of violence. Their message is: *fight!* The study found eight shows that fell into this category.

1. *Batman and Robin* (Fox)
2. *The X-Men* (Fox)
3. *Wild C.A.T.S.* (CBS)
4. *Skeleton Warriors* (CBS)
5. *Mega Man* (Fox)
6. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (CBS)
7. *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* (Fox)
8. *Super Samurai Syber Squad* (ABC)

## **Children's shows with constructive messages**

1. *Where in the World is Carmen San Diego?* (Fox)
2. *Beakman's World* (CBS)
3. *Sweet Valley High* (Fox)

## **PRIME TIME SERIES**

In looking at prime time television series, the UCLA study concludes that ten of the 121 prime time series raise frequent concerns about violence, while eight have occasional problems. The networks are seen to be taking more responsibility. Violent images typical of earlier years – like bullets entering a body – are rare.

Overall, the study sees the violence in prime time series as tame compared to films shown in theatres, home video rentals and pay cable. Most programming uses violence well or not at all and the public seems to support this trend. Of the 30 top shows, only two raise concerns about violence.

### **Series with the most frequent violence:**

#### **1. *Walker, Texas Ranger* (CBS)**

Virtually every episode features Chuck Norris in prolonged, graphic scenes of hand-to-hand combat. Of 15 monitored shows, 12 raised concerns.

#### **2. *Mantis* (Fox)**

The intensity of the violence is less than in *Walker*, but there are far more violent scenes. This is violence for the sake of violence. *Mantis* raised concerns 12 out of the 17 times it was watched.

#### **3. *The X-Files* (Fox)**

*The X-Files* always includes several disturbing violent scenes. But the violence is portrayed as evil, and the two protagonists have a strong aversion to violence. The show was examined 34 times and raised concerns 12 times.

#### **4. *Due South* (CBS)**

This Canadian-produced show is basically a light-hearted comedy that sometimes goes overboard in using ugly, graphic images of violence. *Due South* raised concerns six out of 16 times.

#### **5. *Lois and Clark* (ABC)**

No one scene is excessively graphic or mean-spirited. But there are moments of surprising violence, especially for this kind of cartoon-like program. It raised concerns seven out of 21 times.

#### **6. *Fortune Hunter* (Fox)**

Few scenes are overly graphic, but the sheer volume poses problems. This show was watched five times and raised concerns twice.

#### **7. *Tales from the Crypt* (Fox)**

This series was originally created for a pay cable service, and although Fox cut the nudity, the graphic violence was harder to edit. *Tales from the Crypt* raised concerns in three of seven viewings.

#### **8. *VR-5* (Fox)**

*VR-5* – a show about virtual reality – tends to repeat unsettling scenes of violence. Violence exists in a vacuum, and in an often imaginary setting. It raised concerns in six of 10 viewings.

#### **9. *Marker* (UPN-United Paramount Network)**

Much of the violence in *Marker* could be eliminated without detracting from the story. The show raised concerns eight of the twelve times it was watched.

#### **10. *America's Funniest Home Videos* (ABC)**

This is a show that trivializes violence and its effects. It was viewed 41 times and raised concerns 20 times.

#### **Series with occasional violence:**

1. *America's Most Wanted* (Fox)
2. *SeaQuest* (NBC)
3. *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC)
4. *The Watcher* (UPN)
5. *Rescue 911* (CBS)
6. *Earth2* (NBC)
7. *The Simpsons* (Fox)
8. *The Marshall* (ABC)

#### **Series that deal with violence well:**

1. *NYPD Blue*(ABC)
2. *Homicide* (NBC)
3. *Law and Order* (NBC)

The three series noted above are commendable because they achieve a high level of grittiness and excitement without overemphasizing violence.

## **MADE-FOR-TV MOVIES AND MINI-SERIES**

Less than 15 per cent of the made-for-TV movies studied raised concerns about violence (23 of 161). Still there is room for improvement. Excessive violence seems to stem from a lack of creativity. Good writers can do better than "a big car chase, crashes, explosions and a fight to the death".

Other problems included:

- lack of advisory warning
- violent theme or title
- inappropriate graphicness

## **THEATRICAL FILMS SHOWN ON TV**

Theatrical films shown on TV are a major cause for concern. Violence is a concern in about 42 per cent of them (50 of 118). Some had over 40 scenes of violence. Unlike made-for-TV movies, television producers don't have total control over theatrical films rebroadcast on TV. The films are edited for TV, but only the most violent images are eliminated. Sometimes these movies are broadcast in prime time without enough advisories for parents.

The networks agree that some films simply can't be shown on TV. Consideration should be given to whether theatrical action films containing 30 to 50 scenes of violence should be excluded from broadcast.

Some theatrical films that raise considerable concerns

1. *Under Siege* (ABC)
2. *Black Rain* (CBS)
3. *Ghost* (CBS)
4. *Gladiator* (Fox)
5. *The Last Boy Scout* (CBS)
6. *The Rookie* (ABC)
7. *Marked for Death* (CBS)
8. *Trespass* (Fox)
9. *Home Alone* (NBC)
10. *Any Which Way You Can* (ABC)

## **ON-AIR PROMOTIONS**

On-air promotions constitute a growing problem. Television promotions for movies often feature violent images without any context. Sometimes

these promos air during children's programs. Even if violence does sell, there is no reason why so many scenes of violence should be included in on-air promotions.

## **FINDINGS IN OTHER TV MEDIA**

- Local TV – raises more concerns than commercial network TV. It runs more theatrical films and edits them less.
- Public TV – is not a problem.
- Cable TV – runs more theatrical films than commercial network TV. There is more violence on networks like HBO or Showtime than on the four commercial networks.
- Home video rentals – were examined, but only to compare their content with commercial TV. Over half of the videos viewed would raise concerns if they were shown unedited on TV.
- Video games are another world! Games like *Mortal Kombat II* can be very violent; but most video games only include *tame combat* – where characters just chase or bump into each other.

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## **Recommendations**

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BROADCASTERS**

1. **Scheduling**: Programs with violent themes or images should be shown after 9:00 p.m.
2. **Promotions**: Policies governing on-air movie promos, especially relating to when they can be shown, should be examined.
3. **Theatrical films**: Action films with 30-50 violent scenes should not be shown.
4. **Children's TV**: Children's shows that highlight combat and shows that attract children without using excessive violence, should both be examined.
5. **TV movies**: Watch out for violent titles and use more advisories.
6. **Advisories**: Advisories should be used more frequently and more consistently.
7. **Tonnage**: Better writing is needed to develop plot devices other than violence, that can move a story forward.
8. **Cinematic techniques**: Beware of techniques that accentuate violence,

such as music, close ups, slow motion and sound effects.

9. **Practices and Standards** : Networks should support their Practices and Standards departments, which should have the final say on the treatment of violence.

10. **Shows that deal with violence well**: Learn how to handle conflict, crime and tension from shows that already are handling violence well.

11. **Monitoring** : Shows should be monitored each year.

12. **Follow-up**: Broadcast networks should work with the UCLA Center for Communication Policy, to address the issue of violence on TV.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TV CREATIVE COMMUNITY**

1. Discuss issues related to violence, including the need to:

- show the results of violence
- reduce graphic violence
- put violence in context
- find other ways to move the story forward

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE GOVERNMENT**

1. Take leadership on the issue of violence on TV.
2. Speak to the TV industry with one voice – encourage, persuade and, if necessary, threaten.
3. Give recognition when progress is made.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO AFFILIATES**

1. Put pressure on the networks.
2. Inform the networks of your viewers' tastes, giving examples and details about television unsuitable scenes.
3. Create your own standards for network promotions and don't run promos in the early evening that contain violent images.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO TEACHERS**

1. Become more media literate.
2. Incorporate issues related to TV, such as gender, race and history, into your lesson plans.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO PARENTS**

1. Watch your children watch TV. Ask them questions about what they like, and why.
2. Explore devices like the V-chip that block violence on TV.
3. Express your views to TV stations and networks.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO KIDS

1. Question what you watch on TV and discuss it with your parents.
2. Compare the real world to the TV world. What's different?
3. Think about how your favourite shows deal with conflict. How would you change TV?
4. Tell TV stations and networks how you feel about their programs.

2.

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### Follow-up

The second report of the Television Violence Monitoring Project, from the UCLA Center for Communication Policy, was released in the autumn of 1996. It begins with an assessment of the response to this report and the action that followed its release. The full report can be found on the UCLA Center for Communication Policy Web site at <http://www-ccp.spsr.ucla.edu/1995-96.htm>

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### To order copies

The *Television Violence Monitoring Project Report* produced by UCLA Center for Communication Policy.  
(Los Angeles, CA., U.S.A.), 1995.

Cost: \$10 U.S. (plus postage)

Available from: UCLA Bookstore, 308 Westwood Plaza, Los Angeles, CA., U.S.A. 90024.

The full [1994-95 report](#) is available on the Web. Summaries and full reports of the [1995-96](#) and [1996-97](#) studies are also available on the Web.