

The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) was conducted in the USA between 1994-95 and 1996-97, using three annual studies. What are the issues and implications relevant to Australia?

# National Television Violence Study

Between 1994-95 and 1996-97, several researchers in the USA conducted three annual studies to assess violence on American television. The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) provides a comprehensive picture of the level and nature of violent depictions broadcast by American free-to-air and cable television services. The study also reviews the scientific literature about the media effects of depictions of violence, it provides an analysis of the new USA television program ratings and advisories system, and evaluates anti-violence media campaigns targeted to adolescents.

This article provides a brief summary of the key NTVS findings from the four components of the study and its final recommendations. A more detailed summary of the study can be found on the ABA's web site: <[www.aba.gov.au](http://www.aba.gov.au)>. The ABA has given initial consideration to the NTVS findings and recommendations. The focus of this article is on the issues and implications raised by the study that are relevant to the Australian television broadcasting environment.

## Summary of the NTVS findings

### Review of media effects

The scientific research literature produced over the last three decades was reviewed by NTVS researchers. From this primarily American body of



research, the NTVS researchers developed four conclusions that cover people of all ages in the community, except where otherwise stated.

1. Television violence contributes to harmful effects on viewers.

2. Three types of harmful effects can occur from viewing televised violence. These are learning aggressive attitudes and behaviours, desensitisation to violence, and increased fear of being victimised by violence.

3. Not all violence poses the same degree of risk of these harmful effects. The review identifies a range of specific contextual features that influence audience responses to television violence.

For example, viewers are more likely to learn aggression from attractive perpetrators or characters.

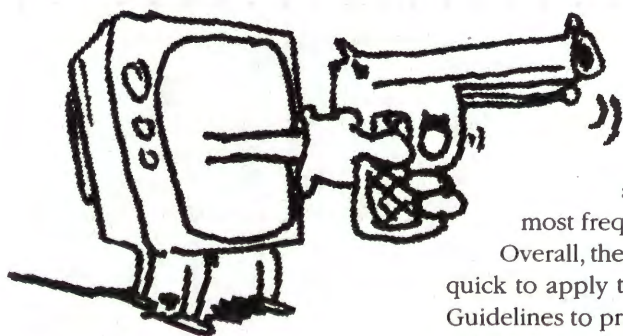
4. Not all viewers are affected by violence in the same way. The NTVS identifies younger children as more vulnerable to certain depictions because of limited abilities to make sense of television. The NTVS researchers state that children younger than seven years of age may be especially vulnerable because they perceive fantasy and cartoon violence as realistic. Young children are also less capable of linking scenes together to make sense of events that occur at different points in a program. ▷



### Violence on American television

The NTVS content analysis examined the amount and nature of violent portrayals on American television with an emphasis on the contextual features that pose risks for the audience. The main findings relate to 'overall programming' (includes drama, comedy, movies, music video, and children's programs) and 'reality programming' (includes news magazine shows, documentaries, police reality shows, and talk and interview programs).

The NTVS researchers found that a substantial amount of television violence is glamorised, sanitised or trivialised, and very few programs emphasised an anti-violence theme.



Sixty percent of programs shown on American television contained violence, with the highest percentage of violence shown on premium cable channels.

For children under seven, high-risk portrayals of violence that teach aggression were found most often in cartoons.

While reality programming was predominantly a feature of daytime television, violent reality programming was concentrated in the evening.

Reality programming was less violent than television programming overall.

There were striking differences in the presentation of violence among genres of reality programs.

### Television program ratings and advisories

The NTVS researchers analysed the frequency, times, and channels where different program ratings and advisories appeared. It included the new Television Parental Guidelines (i.e. ratings for sex and violence readable by a V-chip technology not yet in use) that indicate the appropriateness of programs for different age groups. These guidelines were implemented in

January 1997. This system was later amended by adding content letters to denote the presence of coarse language, sex, violence, and sexual dialogue, which was implemented in October 1997. It should be noted that the sample only covered the new system during its first five months of operation. The entire sample was collected before the revised system of television content advisories was implemented. The main findings given below do not include news or sports programs.

For most programs, age-based ratings without content descriptors had no relation to the presence of violence.

The on-screen presentation of a program's rating was rarely accompanied by a voice-over announcement of the rating. TVG (general audience) and TVPG (parental guidance suggested) were the most frequently used ratings.

Overall, the television industry was quick to apply the Television Parental Guidelines to programs, although individual channels varied greatly in their implementation of the system.

### Anti-violence media campaigns

This component of the study evaluated ways that television can be used to help reduce violence among adolescents. There were two main findings.

- Depicting negative consequences of violent behaviour in anti-violence public service announcements was more effective at influencing adolescents' beliefs about violence than showing no consequences.
- Adolescents knew the importance of depicting negative consequences.

### Recommendations

The NTVS report recognises that public concern about violence in the media has become highly politicised, and is emphasised in the attempt to redress social and personal costs of violence. However, it also concludes that, the effect of thousands of messages conveyed through the most powerful medium of mass communication cannot be underestimated (Federman p5).

The study makes recommendations that are directed primarily to the televi-

sion industry, but also to policy makers and parents. In general, the recommendations aim to encourage more responsible television production and programming, and television viewing. It also recommends further revision and improvement of the USA television ratings system. It does not argue for censorship of television content by government or other legislation.

### Issues and implications for Australia

#### Review of media effects

We need to consider whether to accept any, or all, of the conclusions from the NTVS about the scientific literature on media effects. Other reviewers of the same material have come to different conclusions, or had different emphases, e.g. Kevin Durkin (Australia), and Barry Gunter and David Buckingham (UK).

The media violence debate can be characterised as symptomatic of a USA/European research divide about media effects. The cause-effect relationship is considered to be unproven by many European researchers, whereas many researchers in the USA believe that causality has been proven. More recently, the NTVS researchers have toned down the argument about causality by concluding that certain depictions of violence in the media influence the attitudes and behaviours of audiences over the medium to long term rather than there being a direct cause and effect relationship.

There are also limitations to the scientific research method that have not been mentioned in the NTVS executive summary. Some of these limitations have been identified by Kevin Durkin who points out the main strengths and weaknesses of experimental and correlational studies. For instance, Durkin states that:

one of the principal weaknesses of many experiments is that they are conducted under conditions which differ from real life experiences (p19).

While correlational studies focus on naturally occurring behaviours, Durkin refers to the difficulty in determining the direction of the correlation or relationship between two variables (e.g. a preference for watching violent television and aggressive behaviour) and whether a third unidentified variable is



also involved. Durkin concludes the article by saying that:

the evidence of effects of media violence upon behaviour is controversial but, at best, weak. There is no scientific basis for assuming it plays a major role in the development of aggression ... (p21)

Gunter and McAleer don't question the significance of concern about the effect of violent programs on children, but they question the validity and reliability of the research evidence about television violence. They believe that the extent and nature of the effect of television on children's behaviour is far from being understood and is highly complex. They conclude that

whether or not there is too much violence in programmes is a subjective question as much as it is a scientific one: the answer lies, to a large extent, in prevailing public taste and opinion (p116).

It should also be noted that most of the media effects research studies over the last three decades have been conducted in the USA. Wartella and Reeves have argued in an earlier research paper on children, media effects and violence, that the research agenda in the USA has been framed in response to particular public concerns about different media technologies at various times in history. With regard to the historical and cultural development of the American research, it is perhaps relevant to ask how applicable it is to Australia at this point in time.

Limited effects research has been conducted recently in Australia. One example is a study by Sanson and Di Muccio who concluded that public concern is justified about the effects of heavily promoted antisocial toys that represent aggressive cartoon characters. A recent study by Weddell and Copeland, using observational research, explored the influences of television on children's play. This study found that young children use experiences gleaned from viewing a variety of genres (including news and current affairs programs) to reflect on, analytically process, and 'act out' information and images in their play.

ABA research conducted since 1989 provides data about community perceptions of television violence. The ABA's codes of practice research, which has been conducted annually since 1994, indicates that community concern about

violence on television fluctuates from year to year depending on current events. In 1997, 17 per cent of respondents who had a concern about something seen on television between January and October mentioned violence (about seven per cent of the total sample).

An important regulatory question arises: if the evidence in relation to media violence as a contributory factor to violent behaviour is accepted in Australia (in part or in full), to what extent should the ABA advocate further precautions about specific depictions of violence to those already covered by television industry codes of practice?<sup>1</sup>

It is also reasonable to ask how useful any changes to the depiction of violence on television will be as a guard against a 'culture of violence', especially when violence is also depicted in other media (e.g. cinema, video), and when there are other possible contributing factors to violence in society.

The National Committee on Violence, in a report to Federal Parliament, found that many factors contribute to violence in society. This Committee ranked the causes of violence in the following order: child development and influence of the family; cultural factors (e.g. poverty, hopelessness, gender, firearms access); personality factors; substance abuse; biological factors; mental illness; and media influences.

Merlo-Flores from Argentina also recognises the complexities involved in the relationship between young people, television violence and the broader family and social environment.

### **Violence on American television**

The key issue about the NTVS content analysis is whether the results are comparable to the situation in Australia with regard to the nature and level of violent content on our screens. The short answer is that we don't know for sure because no recent comparable analyses have been conducted in Australia.

However, some basic observations can be made now about the situation in Australia which distinguish it from the American situation. One is that the level and nature of violent content shown of Australian television services is already subject to restrictions via industry codes

of practice. For example, the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice currently deals explicitly with the depictions of violence shown on television.

Australia has fewer pay TV channels and a smaller proportion of pay TV subscribers than the USA. Also, Australian free-to-air television stations have a system of time zoning where programs with certain classifications can only be shown at particular times of the day.

The ABA's requirement for C and P classified programs on commercial television ensures the broadcast of programs that do not present images and events that are unduly distressing or frightening to children.

It could be that the Australian television broadcasting environment, restricts the level and nature of exposure to violent material by children and adults. Unlike the American broadcasting system, time zones in Australia complement the classification system and provide extra control for parents to restrict children's access to some free-to-air television programs such as MA classified movies shown after 9.00 p.m. But, time zones are not a feature of pay TV in Australia, and changes to the current broadcasting environment are imminent with any increase in pay TV subscriber numbers and the implementation of digital television that promises to offer more services.

### **Television program ratings and advisories**

One of the most important points to consider when assessing the NTVS results about America's newly introduced television classification system is the different regulatory framework and composition of television services currently available in Australia compared to the USA.

The television classification system in Australia has been operating in one form or another for about 40 years and appears to be more widely applied, with some variation between commercial and national services. Specific content advisories about sex, violence and language were implemented in Australia in September 1993 by the commercial television industry and apply to the range of television services. Also, Australians have had time to become aware of and apply the system in their daily lives. In



many respects it seems too early for the USA to be evaluating the effectiveness of its newly implemented system.

The current Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice already requires both visual displays and oral announcements for M and MA classifications and content advisories. Broadcasters also have to give visual and oral warnings about potentially distressing material in news and current affairs programs.

ABA research shows that the Australian community has a high level of awareness, understanding and use of the television classification system, particularly by adults who are responsible for the care of children.

**Anti-violence media campaigns**

Australian television does not currently produce or show public service announcements targeted to adolescents. To address this issue we should determine whether there is a need for such announcements in Australia. If a need is determined, then we must ask who should be responsible, and what role the ABA should take?

**Recommendations**

Some of the NTVS recommendations are not relevant to the Australian regulatory environment. Other recommendations need to be examined further with regard to the Australian context and the ABA's co-regulatory responsibilities. For example, the ABA and the television industry could examine the contents of the industry codes of practice in light of the NTVS findings, and the potential for community education strategies.

The NTVS makes useful recommendations in relation to program making, and how program producers could develop programs to ameliorate the potential negative influences of violence. In this regard, one possibility could be for the industry to produce an Advisory Note about violent depictions for television producers, to accompany television industry codes of practice.

Jo Groebel reports on a recently conducted UNESCO cross-cultural study examining violent content in the media and its relationship to the everyday life experiences of children. Among other things, he suggests that three major

strategies should be considered as possible solutions: (a) public debate and 'common ground' talks between politicians, producers, and teachers; (b) the development of professional codes of conduct and self-discipline for producers; and (c) innovative forms of media education to create competent and critical media users.

**Preliminary response by the ABA**

After giving initial consideration to the findings of the NTVS and its implications for Australia, the ABA will proceed with four preliminary actions. The ABA will:

- Organise a Forum on the Portrayal of Violence in the Media to critically discuss and debate the issues associated with violence on Australian television;
- Consider the value of an Advisory Note on violent content for television producers, to accompany television industry codes of practice; and
- Consider the need for community education strategies to inform the community about the potential harms of media violence.

The Forum on the Portrayal of Violence in the Media will take place in November 1998.

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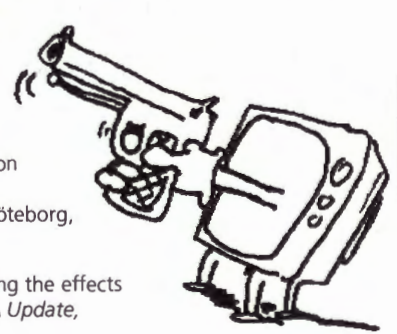
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<sup>1</sup> The ABA's code of practice monitoring responsibilities relate to commercial, community and subscription broadcasting services, and not to the ABC and SBS. However, the ABA is required to investigate unresolved complaints about issues covered in all codes of practice, including the national ABC and SBS services.



For more information contact the Research section of the ABA on 9334 7700.