



SCREEN VIOLENCE

Recent concern over the levels of violence by young criminals has raised again questions over the influence on children and young adults of violence on TV, video recordings or at the cinema.

This note looks at scientific evidence of the effects of screen violence and issues raised.

TRENDS IN SCREEN VIOLENCE

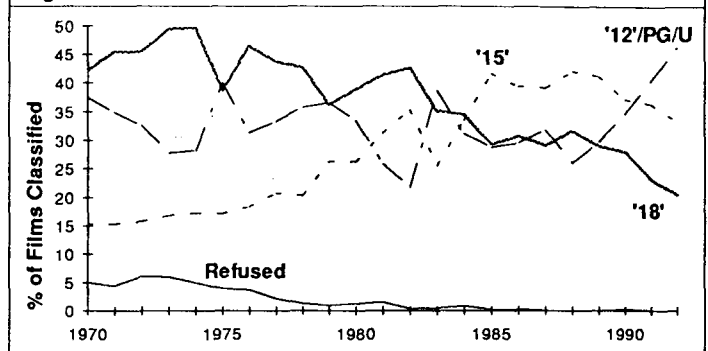
Technology has transformed home entertainment via video recorders, satellite and cable TV, while special effects technology allows murders etc. to be shown in 'realistic' detail in settings from science fiction through 'teenage terror' movies to thrillers or 'action' dramas. On the news, portable cameras and satellite links bring the graphic detail of distant events straight into the home. Technology has also changed viewing habits. Films are now viewed more via videos and TV than in the cinema, while home computers and video games can create an additional route for violent material.

Information on trends in screen violence is patchy. Television content has been scrutinised for some time by the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and its predecessor (IBA), by groups such as the National Viewer and Listeners Association (NVLA) and by academic researchers (e.g. the Communications Research Group at Aston). Over the last 10-15 years, the limited data suggest, if anything, a decrease in the quantity of violence on the four main TV channels, although information on shifts in the 'type' of violence is lacking. Surveys can be bedevilled by difficulties in defining 'violent' acts which range from cartoon fantasy to sadistic terror; the Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC) has now embarked on very detailed content analysis¹ which will provide a basis for analysing future trends.

At the cinema, the recent debate in the media has highlighted many successful films notable for their violence. Whether this means that audiences are exposed to more now than in the past is difficult to establish. Trends in UK film classification are shown in Figure 1; the proportion of films refused a certificate or awarded an '18' has fallen, while '15' and less restrictive classifications have risen. But this does not give much information on trends in violence viewed since the

1. The BSC's 1992 surveys recorded 405 'violent' incidents in 122 programmes from 13-19 Jan 1992, and 478 in 143 programmes from 17-23 Sept 1992. Eleven programmes in the January survey were judged to contain 'extreme' cases of violence based on the amount of pain or fear and blood, witnesses' reactions, and the way death was portrayed.

Figure 1 RESULTS OF BBFC CLASSIFICATIONS 1970-92



British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) takes into account factors other than violence (sexual content, bad language etc.); neither is there any independent 'calibration' to see if standards of classification have changed.

Trends in video viewing may be most significant since there is less formal control over who watches films with a restricted rating. The numbers of recordings attracting '18' and '15' BBFC ratings have changed little since 1985 (43-46% of films classified); however the rise in the number of video recorders (now in 68 % of UK homes) is likely to have increased home viewing in all categories. Moreover, anecdotal evidence and surveys suggest that material classified as '15' or '18' is routinely seen by younger audiences, whether due to failures at the retail outlet, lack of parental control, or evasion of rules (e.g. due to TVs in young people's bedrooms). The BBFC has recently commissioned research to try and quantify the prevalence of 'under-age' viewing by secondary school pupils.

EFFECTS OF SCREEN VIOLENCE

The widespread use of TV for children's education and the willingness of companies to spend large amounts of money on advertising shows that many expect TV to exert considerable influence on viewers. However the degree of influence of screen violence has remained a contentious area for some time.

Ways in which screen violence could affect behaviour include:-

- 1 imitation of the general role of violence (e.g. as a means of resolving arguments), of specific techniques, or by providing role models;
- 2 triggering of generalised aggression or activation of latent 'pathological' aggressive impulses;
- 3 desensitisation by dulling feelings of sympathy towards 'victims' and creating indifference to the visual impact of violence;
- 4 creating a frame of mind that regards violence as a 'normal' and socially acceptable response.

Psychologists have measured the effects of violent films on physical reactions, behaviour and attitude. On the first (imitative) effects, laboratory experiments and surveys suggest children do imitate novel actions including aggressive ones, with relatively long-lived effects. Inhibitions against aggressive actions can also be reduced. The second group of effects (activation and strengthening of aggressive tendencies or drives) has also been demonstrated. The third group - effects on sensitivity - are more equivocal since desensitisation to the same repeated violent scene can be readily shown; but this does not necessarily extend to a general desensitisation to new violent scenes.

The fourth category groups effects which change the basic values, attitudes and moral code which guide an individual's actions - where violence becomes acceptable and feelings of sympathy for others are replaced by indifference and callousness. Here it is more difficult to devise experiments, but studies show that the threshold of tolerated violence is raised in groups who have watched violent films. Other studies also suggest similar effects - e.g. students who watched violent pornography were less likely to sympathise with rape victims.

These 'experimental' findings are supported by a limited number of field studies on the effects of screen violence in more realistic settings. Nevertheless, links between screen violence and behaviour are questioned by some; for example, sociologists studying links between juvenile deviance and social or cultural disadvantage may dismiss psychology experiments because they are acquired outside of a social context. Policymakers can thus be faced with experts who argue that the evidence supports a direct effect of violence, while others see the evidence as inconclusive.

Of the many 'expert' bodies to have reviewed this subject, the US Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence concluded in 1969 that, while not a principal cause of violence in Society, TV was a contributory factor. Since it was only one of many influences, effects depended on what other influences operated; children from low-income areas and from backgrounds where unstable or violent lifestyles were common were more vulnerable than those with more positive parental and other influences. The US Surgeon General's 1972 report on the effects of TV violence, however failed to reach any firm conclusions, although a 1982 'update' reported much support for a positive relationship between televised violence and later aggressive behaviour. UK reviews published by the Home Office (HO) in 1979 (with a short update in 1986) and the BSC in 1989 have tended to emphasise the uncertainties in the science. However, recent work in the USA and elsewhere continues to find that screen violence can desensitise viewers, raise aggression levels, reduce empathy for victims and enhance the role of violence in conflict resolution.

Many psychologists now conclude that the effects of screen violence are real, and may be best seen as an 'overlay' on existing predispositions. Effects on most young people are generally minor (US studies suggest they account for 3-10% to an individual's propensity for violence); even so, statistical analyses show that the practical consequences of such 'small' effects can be substantial over the whole population. Moreover, psychiatrists working with the small minority of delinquent and violent children and adolescents conclude that with some individuals, the impact of screen violence can be seriously harmful. For instance, the NW Regional Adolescent Forensic Service in their work with adolescent murderers over the last ten years, have noticed that in a quarter of the cases seen, viewing of violent videos was one of a range of causative factors², on occasions providing material for re-enactment during the act. The Royal College of Psychiatrists points to media violence as one area where tighter controls could help protect vulnerable children.

There is thus a convergence of the psychology and psychiatry results which suggest that 'vulnerable' individuals may be particularly affected by images of violence. Where there is appropriate parenting, youngsters exposed to violence on TV can have such events placed in context and explained. However with a minority of young people where there are no such influences, there may be a danger that video, film or TV can become the dominant source of external guidance on what levels of violence are and are not 'acceptable' and related to individual success. Aggression is a problem-solving behaviour learned early in life and is therefore resistant to change. For adolescents with little prospect of success in their own lives, the capability for repetitive viewing, fast-forwarding etc. of a violent video (particularly sexual violence) may allow such images to dominate, creating a trigger for later violence.

The power of a particular image may depend on many factors - its context, its graphic detail, the degree of empathy engendered for the victim, whether the perpetrator suffers adverse consequences, whether the setting is real or fantasy - even the background music. Such 'contextual' factors are taken into account by the BBFC in its ratings and referred to in the guidance issued by the BSC, BBC and ITC (see Box 1). However, recent research commissioned by the BSC at the University of Leeds indicates that many younger children display a lack of understanding of what they see. While this may indicate that the influence of the TV screen (good or bad) may be less than other social activities, it also means that children may place actions in distorted scenarios embodying quite different values and attitudes to those intended by the programmer.

2. Such findings are not immune to challenge, and some argue that they do not demonstrate cause and effect but arise because young offenders may just happen to like violent videos. This, however, begs the question of whether such tastes will be reinforced by further violent material.

BOX 1 CURRENT UK CONTROLS

In the cinema, the Film Industry operates a voluntary system via the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). Outside of certain areas where BBFC practice is to cut, matters of taste and decency are dealt with primarily through classification according to the categories below. Video recordings are covered by the Video Recordings Act (1984) which requires any video supplied to have been classified by the BBFC, which is required to give particular consideration to the likelihood of home viewing and the law, in particular the Obscene Publications Act. The classification system differs from films.

Film	Video	Meaning
U	U	Universal, Suitable for all
-	Uc	Suitable for all, especially children
PG	PG	Parental Guidance; general viewing, but some scenes may be unsuitable for young children
12	-	Suitable only for persons 12 and over
15	15	Suitable only for persons 15 and over
18	18	Suitable only for persons 18 and over

The law makes it illegal to supply videos to anyone below the age of the classification restriction.

On TV, the BBC Governors are responsible for relevant standards at the BBC, while commercial TV Companies operate under the terms of licences from the ITC (or S4c). Both BBC and ITC have their own programming guidance which, under the Broadcasting Act (1990) must reflect the BSC's Code. Satellite TV which originates from the UK is covered by the same ITC code as terrestrial channels. Broadcasts from other EC countries are regulated under standards within the EC Broadcasting Directive (89/552/EEC).

The requirement for the ITC to preview programmes was removed by the Broadcasting Act in 1992, and the ITC can now intervene only after screening - either following complaints or where it believes its programming code has been breached. The ITC can apply sanctions in the form of a fine or ultimately licence withdrawal. The BSC also considers complaints from individuals or organisations and makes its findings public.

Other psychological research may be relevant in view of the considerable emphasis placed on chronological age in determining what is legal or suitable for viewing. Child psychologists recognise specific phases of moral development (see Box 2), which may well be important in determining the impact of a given violent film or scene. Yet there is no automatic link between chronological age and moral 'age', so that the former may be a somewhat imperfect measure of susceptibility.

ISSUES**Science and Current Controls**

What implications does the 'science' have for current policies? To a large extent, the current system has already implicitly accepted that screen violence may have an important effect on viewers. The BBFC, the BSC, ITC and broadcasters state that they take the issue of violence's effects on younger viewers very seriously. The BBFC is concerned, for instance over the danger of copy-cat violence, learning techniques of wounding or killing, personalised violence, glamourising violence or weaponry and sadistic acts, and will require cuts in

BOX 2 STEPS IN THE MORAL DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN

Child psychologists and educationalists see children passing through the following stages in their moral development:-

Stage

- 1 **Age-4..** Self-centred morality where the greatest good is in getting what one wants
- 2 **Age ~5.** Accepts adult's right to make rules without question
- 3 **Age 5.5-7.** Preoccupied with fairness
- 4 **Age 8-14.** Increasing self-consciousness and concern that people should think well of them. Need to have approval of others which, depending on who they wish to impress may lead to positive and healthy social values, or to negative and antisocial ones
- 5 **Age 15+.** More disinterested approach, becoming more aware of the wider society and community interests
- 6 **Adulthood.** Developed a fully principled conscience and a concern for general human rights.

(**Note:** Individuals may not progress through all stages and many never reach stage 4 let alone stage 5).

such areas even under the more restrictive classifications; it is particularly concerned over screen violence against women. With films on video, the likelihood of home viewing leads to the BBFC applying tighter standards than at the cinema on allowable amounts of violence and the classification. With TV, the ITC Code makes explicit reference to the potential effects on young viewers discussed earlier; the BSC and BBC codes however describe the scientific evidence as inconclusive or confusing, basing their codes on a 'prudent' assumption that there are effects (BBC) or on the premise that society should not encourage or delight in cruelty or brutality for its own sake (BSC). The latest review of the BBC code will base its rationale on the fact that screen violence does upset some people and can, in excess, be accused of desensitising viewers.

While many see current controls as having struck an appropriate balance with the rights of people in a free society to watch what they wish, some Ministers have expressed concern over the amount of realistic screen violence and look to the existing structures to apply appropriate standards. Ministers at the Department of National Heritage (DNH) recently stated that research had not produced any conclusive evidence of a link between screen violence and violent behaviour; yet many psychologists and psychiatrists now conclude that the evidence for such a link is strong to overwhelming. Since the last major UK Government review of this issue (by HO) was in 1979 (with a short update in 1986), one option would be for DNH to support an authoritative update by the relevant professional and learned societies (British Psychological Society, Royal College of Psychiatrists, Royal Society etc.), rather than relying on individual reviewers as in the past.

Attitudes on the need for additional measures depend to some extent on how far current age-based viewing restrictions are seen as effective. The ability to record and replay allows some children to evade the TV 'watershed'; moreover complying with the video classifica-

tion scheme depends very much on parental control which may be lacking. The inherent 'leakiness' of restrictions on under-age viewing thus leads some to conclude that it is unwise to rely on these controls alone. There is also the work on children's perception and moral development mentioned earlier which undermines reliance on chronological age as the basis for restrictions, and casts doubt on the relevance to children of adult perceptions of context, motive and impact of violence. Such considerations can be seen as arguing for caution in the portrayal of violence as a whole, rather than relying on age-based restrictions. Indeed, some see the level of screen violence as setting Society's standards for what is an acceptable level of violence; it would then follow that a society keen to encourage a less violent society would lower the threshold of aggression that is viewed for entertainment.

Perspectives on Current Levels of Violence

The BSC's most recent surveys found that, while 2% of the four main channels' viewing contained scenes of 'unjustified' violence, these did not cause viewers serious concern - more was expressed over bad language. TV is now subject to two independent complaints channels (BSC and ITC); which together reveal a recent rise in complaints (Table 1). While this may indicate a lack of balance between programme content and public expectations of acceptable broadcasting, some media analysts feel it reflects increased public sensitivity as much as changes in programme content.

The BSC surveys found higher levels of 'unjustified' violence (6-7%) in Satellite TV (BSkyB). The UK's main satellite and cable TV channels are bound by the ITC's codes; however, because subscribers are less likely to complain, they may exert less constraint on programme content than open channels. Indeed, some see this as leading to a divergence in standards on violence between the main channels and satellite TV, thus placing a greater responsibility on the regulator (ITC) to ensure compliance with its code. In this context, BSkyB initially asked the BBFC to classify all films shown to subscribers, but this arrangement was terminated in 1992. The (former) BSC Chairman suggested in May 1993 that BSkyB should resume this arrangement; however, this would not affect the prime regulatory requirement to comply with the ITC code. The ITC has been reviewing the violence content of satellite TV, and has not, to date, concluded that its code has been infringed.

Films remain a major source of screen violence, and the BBFC remains the primary control on viewing at the cinema and in the home. The BBFC is already charged with applying more rigorous standards to videos in

3. Parliament is currently considering ways of strengthening the law, and the Video Recordings Bill has been considered by the House of Lords and is due for a 2nd Reading in July in the House of Commons. The Bill (sponsored by Lord Birkett and Giles Brandreth MP) contains a number of technical amendments to improve the operation of the 1984 Act.

Table 1 COMPLAINTS TO THE BSC AND ITC ON VIOLENCE

		Total	Violence	Number Upheld
BSC:	1991/2	898	100	45 in 11 programmes
	1992/3	1192	299	33 in 11 programmes
ITC:	1991/2	1582	66	data not available
	1992/3	2032	54	data not available

view of their being for home entertainment and lacking the controls on access of the cinema. However, the NVLA points to the statutory requirements for TV broadcasters not to offend against 'good taste and decency' and argues that this criterion should also be applied to videos since they are also viewed in the home. Programme makers and many others point out that the UK already has more restrictions on screen sex and violence than some other EC States, the USA and many other countries, and would see such proposals as restricting creative freedom, with the danger that restrictions aimed at 'gratuitous' scenes could affect great literature and history alike, as well as the freedom to deal with contemporary issues.

The BBFC has pointed to a particular difficulty over the lack of a '12' classification on video which means that films which attracted '12' in the cinema are rated '15' on video, leading parents and children to assume that '15' films are generally suitable for younger viewers. The BBFC also intends to provide more information on the reason for the rating (i.e. whether due to sexual content, violence or bad language) to help parents exercise control. The Industry (represented by the Video Standards Council - VSC) supports the provision of more information; however it has reservations over an extra legally binding '12' category due in part to concerns by Trading Standards Officers over enforceability, but also because of fears that this would be seen as loosening current standards. The VSC sees a need for better consultation between the industry and the BBFC on applying the controls under the Video Recordings Act³.

Finally, there is the question of whether further research would help resolve remaining disagreements on this issue. The Home Office and DNH see research as primarily a matter for the industry and regulators, and the BSC has a modest research programme (£0.3M) underway on *inter alia*, children's perception of TV. The BBFC (with the BSC and ITC) will also survey over 200 juvenile offenders during this year to determine their viewing habits. However, some doubt whether further surveys of this nature will resolve differing views, and psychologists see a longitudinal study as offering much greater promise. Such a study would have to find groups of children who had already been exposed to different levels of screen violence and follow their development to see to what extent systematic differences in attitude or behaviour followed (having of course made allowance for other contributory - e.g. socioeconomic and familial - factors).