

# **VIOLENCE AND THE VIEWER**

**Report of the  
Joint Working Party on Violence on Television  
1998**

British Broadcasting Corporation  
Broadcasting Standards Commission  
Independent Television Commission

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

1. In December 1996, following a meeting with the then Secretary of State for National Heritage, the Chairmen of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Independent Television Commission (ITC) and the Broadcasting Standards Commission (BSC) agreed a programme of action to address public concern about violence on television.

2. It was agreed in January 1997 to take forward elements of the programme of action through a joint BBC-ITC-BSC working party on violence under an independent chairman. These were to work together to help educate viewers about the principles underpinning the BBC-ITC-BSC codes and guidelines and, in particular, policies on scheduling and the watershed, and to explore how broadcasters could improve advance programme information for viewers.

3. This is the first time that the BBC with its Charter responsibilities, the ITC as regulator of independent television, and the BSC whose advisory function covers both sectors, have been brought together in a joint working party.

4. The Joint Working Party met on 12 occasions between April 1997 and April 1998. It further defined its remit in terms of a number of specific tasks. These were:

To review the issues of violence on television via the consideration of:

- \* prior research findings;
- \* any additional research which might be commissioned;
- \* the existing codes of practice;
- \* the different approaches taken by broadcasters both inside and outside the UK.

To consider various methods of alerting and educating viewers via:

- \* a review of existing watershed policy;
- \* listings, trailers, presentation announcements, Ceefax and Teletext, programme classification systems;
- \* making available more information about existing broadcaster practices;
- \* enhanced media education in schools, and for parents and children.

To publish a report and a statement of common principles which will be presented to the Secretary of State and made available to the public.

5. On two occasions, the Joint Working Party met with representatives of the terrestrial, cable and satellite channels to discuss the research findings, the options for informing and educating viewers, and a draft statement of principles. However, this report represents the agreed views of the BBC, the ITC and the BSC acting in a regulatory and advisory capacity.

## **Introduction**

6. Violence is a fact of life. So long as it exists in society and the world, television programmes should reflect it and report it, both in fact and fiction. To do otherwise would be a substantial disservice to society.

7. But the manner in which violence is portrayed is a matter of legitimate public concern, and for many years those charged with the regulation of television in Britain have striven to establish clear guidelines governing such portrayal. Their objective has been to achieve the right balance between legitimate freedom of expression and the protection of society, and in particular its youngest members.

8. Achieving this balance becomes much more difficult as the sources of television programming multiply. The approach originally established for terrestrially-based mass audience channels is unlikely to be as appropriate in a changing multi-channel environment of cable and satellite, with subscription channels, Pay Per View, interactive services and a highly segmented marketplace.

9. The Joint Working Party has therefore rejected the notion that identical rules can be established to cover all service providers. **However, it believes strongly that it is timely to publish and advocate a statement of common principles which sets out an agreed philosophical and practical basis for editorial decisions across the whole range of services currently available, and those likely to become available in the UK in a more fragmented digital world.**

10. **The Joint Working Party also recommends that new entrants to broadcasting should be expected to subscribe to the statement of common principles as agreed by existing broadcasters.**

## **The Evidence and Implications of Research**

11. The Joint Working Party looked again at the many concerns which surround violence on the screen, including desensitisation, fear of crime and the encouragement

of aggressive behaviour. It remains convinced that the relationship between the viewer and the screen is complex and active. Much depends on personal experience and outlook, the nature of the programme, such as whether it is factual or fictional, and the degree to which the viewer relates to what is being shown.

12. New research conducted last year supports that view and suggests that audiences distinguish clearly between factual violence, which people feel they need to see in order to understand what is going on in the world, and fictional violence which they may or may not choose to watch.

13. Research suggests that the violence which disturbs is that with which the viewer identifies and is graphic and relentless. The choreographed violence of many action films is thought to be less shocking than scenes closer to home in which the violence is personal, realistic and cruel.

14. The Joint Working Party remains convinced of the need for continuing research to monitor changing audience attitudes and to provide working tools for regulation which enable decision-makers to reflect audience concerns.

**15. It therefore endorses the joint industry approach pioneered in the Sheffield and Leeds studies reported here and urges the broadcasters to continue to work together with the BBC, ITC and BSC to improve definitions of violence and to investigate further the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable depiction of violent scenes on television.**

### **Information for Viewers**

16. The Joint Working Party believes it is critical that potential viewers are provided with sufficient reliable information, in advance of viewing, to enable them to make informed choices for their particular domestic circumstances. It reviewed current provision of information about scheduling policy and the content of specific programmes and debated the merits of other systems of programme classification.

17. It was reassured that broadcasters operate rigorous procedures to ensure compliance with current regulatory codes and guidelines in decision-making about the portrayal of violence. These demonstrate a commitment to scheduling difficult material in accordance with the watershed as a well-established means of protecting younger viewers. Though new services such as Pay-Per-View or (Near) Video on Demand, based on a different relationship with viewers, may be permitted an earlier watershed than 9pm, this commitment is expected to continue.

18. Nine out of ten parents - and indeed a similar percentage of all viewers - are aware of this family viewing policy operated by British broadcasters. The Joint Working Party remains convinced that the public's concern for vulnerable viewers is

best addressed by retaining and strengthening this policy through further information and education. **It therefore urges that all broadcasters who continue to implement such policies from whatever broadcast platform should take additional steps to explain and reinforce the watershed message on their screens and to continue to police it with rigour.**

19. Viewers receive most of their information about specific programmes from listings publications and teletext services. **The Joint Working Party recommends that the broadcasters should work with all types of listings providers to improve the usefulness of information on specific programmes and to include information on the watershed.**

20. In the digital environment, Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs) will become the means of access to television services and a source of information about programme content. Broadcasters are committed to ensuring that EPGs carry adequate guidance for viewers about potentially disturbing material.

21. Information about programme content is also provided in trailers and in on-air announcements and warnings. The Joint Working Party reviewed a range of trailers and was reassured that, on the whole, they communicated the nature of the programme without acting as a lure for younger viewers. However, it decided that, as trailers are primarily a promotional device, they have limited potential for providing advice about difficult content.

22. In contrast, the Joint Working Party places great importance on the provision of on-air announcements and warnings, some of which could be more transparent in ensuring that viewers clearly recognise when they are being informed about material which may upset or concern them. **The Joint Working Party urges broadcasters to continue to improve the amount and clarity of advice they give to viewers.**

23. Broadcasters are working on a new initiative arising out of discussions with the Joint Working Party which will use teletext services to reinforce verbal warnings and provide a constant reference point for viewers. **The Joint Working Party has secured the agreement of ITV, the BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5 and BSkyB to collaborate with the relevant text service providers towards implementing this service and urges all other UK-based broadcasters carrying text services to adopt the proposal.**

24. The Joint Working Party discussed a range of classification systems adopted by other countries, mostly for eventual use with the V-chip or a similar selective 'blocking' mechanism. The shortcomings of such systems were noted, including their inability to provide consistent and reliable classification. There were also serious doubts about their ability to prevent technically adept children from accessing inappropriate programme material. The Joint Working Party became convinced that the V-chip and other parental control devices offer an inadequate 'quick-fix' solution

to the complex problem of controlling disturbing material in the multi-channel, digital world. It also suggests that any use of electronic methods of this kind, such as EPGs combined with a parental control button for more specialised channels, should be properly assessed following their introduction in the UK.

25. In the digital environment, the majority of viewers will, for the foreseeable future, continue to view built schedules provided by the major broadcasters. However, as the number and take-up of new digital services grows, the Joint Working Party believes it will be necessary to revisit the issues raised in this report on a more regular basis. **It recommends that the close collaboration which this current initiative represents be continued so that new concerns about violence on television which may result from changes in the broadcasting environment can be fully addressed.**

### **The Role of Media Education**

26. British viewers in the 21st century will be faced with a greater degree of choice than ever before. Whatever the extent of our future reliance upon regulation, self-regulation, information provision or even selective blocking mechanisms to allow parents and guardians to regulate the family viewing menu, the development of appropriate critical viewing skills from the earliest possible age is long overdue.

27. Evidence from other countries as well as from the UK suggests that the need for an emphasis on the educational process is urgent. **The Joint Working Party therefore calls on all those concerned to build on existing activity and develop a national strategy for media education, especially of young people, by all available means. It recommends that an industry group of regulators, broadcasters and programme-makers should initially be set up to establish appropriate initiatives and partnerships with teachers, parents and government.**

28. **It further recommends that any such strategy should involve all those with similar educational objectives in film, video and related media, many of whom already have relevant achievements and experiences to contribute.**

29. Teachers at both primary and secondary levels should be involved in the design of the strategy at an early stage. Their influence in helping young children to acquire appropriate skills will be central to its implementation. Similarly, the parents and guardians of young people will also play a crucial part in fulfilling its aims.

30. The Joint Working Party concludes that a collaborative approach will be necessary in order to draw in all relevant elements. **It therefore believes that there is a clear role for government to provide the lead in co-ordinating the proposed strategy with the many different parties involved, as well as ensuring that appropriate curricular initiatives are taken.**



## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

Some have asked why violence has to be portrayed at all on television. The answer to this question seemed clear to the working party. Violence is a fact of life. So long as it exists in society and the world, television programmes should reflect it and report it, both in fact and fiction. To do otherwise would be a substantial disservice to society. But the manner in which violence is portrayed is a matter of legitimate public concern, and for many years those charged with the regulation of television in Britain have striven to establish clear guidelines governing such portrayal.

At the simplest level there are depicted acts of violence which may go beyond the bounds of what is tolerable for many viewers. Similarly, there is the portrayal of violence which is potentially so disturbing that it might be held to be harmful, particularly for young or emotionally insecure viewers. Then there is the fear that violence shown on television might be imitated in real life, and the more complex hypothesis that repeated exposure to the portrayal of violence at varying levels may eventually desensitise the viewer to such material and create a greater tolerance of violent behaviour in the real world. As a consequence of these anxieties, a sophisticated regulatory framework has grown up in the UK over many years, with the objective of achieving the right balance between legitimate freedom of expression and the protection of society, and in particular the protection of its youngest members.

But here the working party noted that children are not present in more than 70 per cent of households in the UK. In the minority of households which do contain children, British research indicates that it is those who experience violence in childhood who are more prone to violent behaviour and have a greater tolerance of such behaviour.

A question arises, therefore, about the degree of regulatory intervention which is justified, and on whose behalf it is initiated. It is clear that well-balanced people can appreciate, and will sometimes seek out and view, the depiction of violence in very different contexts, without harm to themselves or the wider society. The principle of free choice within the law, coupled with that of free expression, needs to be balanced with great care against the possibility of harm done to, or by, a very small vulnerable minority of the audience.

Achieving this balance has become much more difficult within the last few years as the sources of television programming have multiplied. The approach originally established for terrestrially-based mass audience channels is unlikely to be as appropriate in a changing multi-channel environment of cable and satellite, with subscription services, Pay-Per-View, interactive services and a highly segmented marketplace.

New means of conveying material, such as the Internet, were outside the remit of the committee. Nevertheless, the different nature of segmented audiences in a digital

environment, and their inherent freedom of choice within the law, will eventually make detailed regulation of the portrayal of violence on television increasingly impractical. What is appropriate for a child viewing in a family context (or alone) at 8pm on terrestrial television is clearly not necessarily the same as that which is appropriate for an adult at the same time on a Pay Per View, (Near) Video on Demand or premium encrypted subscription channel.

The working party has therefore rejected the notion that identical rules can be established to cover all service providers. However, it believes strongly that it is timely to publish and advocate a statement of principles which sets out an agreed philosophical and practical basis for editorial decisions across the whole range of services currently available, and those likely to become available in the UK in a more fragmented digital world.

Based on the evidence of research carried out in the UK, the working party was unable to accept the notion of a simple supplier/consumer model of television viewing. The viewer is self-evidently not merely a blank sheet on which programming impacts: every individual viewer brings to every individual programme the benefit and the burden of personal experience. In this sense all television experience is already interactive long before technology advanced such an ambition.

Responsibility for what is seen on British television does not lie solely in the hands of the programme providers. The working party noted that there is a partnership between service provider and service viewer which ultimately determines which programme is seen, and by which section of the population. Moreover, every day of the year, there are millions of such decisions which go to determine the viewing diet of households throughout the country. And in the light of these continuing multiple decisions, it is critical that potential viewers are provided with sufficient reliable information, in advance of viewing, to enable them to make an informed choice for their particular domestic circumstances and audience composition. It is axiomatic that such choices will be different depending on particular domestic viewing circumstances.

Nevertheless broadcasters, led by the terrestrial mass audience channels, have over many years taken a positive role in regulating violent material. The concept of a watershed time before which all programming should be suitable for a family audience is well established in the public mind, and its purpose broadly understood.

The television audience in this country is sophisticated, and research regularly demonstrates that it is familiar both with the grammar of broadcasting and some of its regulatory background. However, the working party recommends that all broadcasters should take additional steps to explain and reinforce the watershed message on their own screens, and to police it with rigour. It believes that such a policy will continue to help prevent high-risk groups in the audience, and in particular children, from coming across violent material on terrestrial television. The working party considers that

viewers have the right not to be 'ambushed' by such material, and this argues for an increase in the level of descriptive information available about difficult programming.

Many commentators have been attracted by the possibility of a technology-based 'solution' such as the V-chip which could filter out objectionable programming material, particularly that with violent content. However, the working party noted the serious technical limitations of existing systems being trialled in other countries, which have so far prevented the establishment of a functioning electronic editorial gate-keeping system. It also recognised the difficulty of establishing a controlling classification system which can meet the complexities of the real-life viewing environment. Here it took into account the wide range of critical comment, not only from broadcasters themselves, but from viewer organisations such as the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVLA) which has made clear its specific opposition to the introduction of the V-chip.

However, the launch of the multi-channel world of digital satellite and terrestrial channels means that some UK broadcasters are already planning to offer additional parental electronic controls. These devices may or may not be effective for controlling access to more specialised channels with their narrower remit. The working party remains convinced that such an approach is not appropriate for the mixed and broader schedules of the existing terrestrial broadcasters. Indeed it could disrupt, and possibly destroy, the strong contract with the audience represented by the watershed.

This scepticism about the efficiency of electronic 'blocking' tools, together with doubts about the extension of classification systems, places even greater emphasis on providing comprehensive information to viewers and on drawing them into a deeper understanding and acceptance of the regulatory codes built up around the watershed. The working party also believes that a long-term emphasis on the educational process needed to promote critical viewing skills among viewers - particularly the young - is essential. To this end, it urges that this task is carried forward initially by an industry group comprising regulators, broadcasters and programme-makers in order to develop appropriate initiatives and partnerships. Such a process, over time, is the only sure guarantee that what is viewed in an increasingly complex, if not chaotic, television universe is placed in its proper perspective.

While media education may offer the best promise of a long-term solution to the concerns raised, other remedies outlined in this report may be more appropriate in the shorter term. Chapter 2 sets out the statement of common principles of regulation, self-regulation and advice concerning the portrayal of violence in television programmes as agreed by existing broadcasters. Chapter 3 places particular emphasis upon the need for further research into and analysis of the nature and acceptability of different portrayals of violence. Alongside the reinforcement of existing measures, Chapter 4 proposes a new and practical approach to the provision of necessary information in order to empower viewers to make their own appropriate decisions. It also discusses the merits of different forms of programme classification and their

implications for content regulation in an increasingly multi-channel environment. Finally, Chapter 5 explores the role of media education and recommends the launch of a national strategy, with an emphasis on the early acquisition of critical viewing skills among young viewers.

## **CHAPTER 2: STATEMENT OF COMMON PRINCIPLES**

This statement has been drawn up by the Joint Working Party on Violence representing the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission. It identifies some basic principles of regulation, self-regulation and advice which bear directly upon the portrayal of violence in television programmes, and to which all broadcasters in the United Kingdom are committed.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Role of Violence**

- 1 Violence takes many forms. The ravages of natural disaster. Outrages committed by terrorists. War. Human conflict in fact and popular fiction. The antics of cartoon creatures. Body contact sports.
- 2 It is a fact of life. So long as it exists in society and the world, television programmes must be able to reflect it, portray it and report it.
- 3 To seek to stop broadcasting from telling and retelling hard truths about the world would be a substantial disservice both to democracy and to our understanding of the human condition. The portrayal of violence has played a major part in popular storytelling throughout human history, and continues to have a place in the civilising process of which broadcasting is a part.
- 4 At the same time, there are anxieties among sections of the viewing audience about why, how and when violence is shown on television. There is a fear that repeated exposure to violence desensitises. There is a concern that it will make some viewers more fearful of crime and even reluctant to go out. And there is an anxiety that violence on the screen will encourage violence in life.
- 5 Broadcasters accordingly have a responsibility to the public to ensure that a proper balance is struck between freedom of expression and protection of the vulnerable.

### **Scheduling Programmes**

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<sup>1</sup> The statement draws upon the ITC Programme Code, the BSC Code of Practice, and the BBC Producers' Guidelines and Guidelines for the Portrayal of Violence on BBC Television. It is not intended to replace those publications or in any way to reduce the responsibility of programme-makers to comply with the rules and guidelines set out in them.

- 6 When deciding when to show programmes containing violent material, broadcasters will carefully consider the likely composition and expectations of the audience.
- 7 Material which is unsuitable for children will not be shown before the watershed time of 9pm (or 8pm on premium encrypted subscription channels).
- 8 After the watershed, programmes may become gradually and progressively more suitable for an adult audience.
- 9 Individual broadcasters will ensure that their television schedules do not 'bunch' violent programmes together.

### **The Portrayal of Violence**

- 10 The portrayal of violence will always be editorially or dramatically justifiable.
- 11 Programmes will avoid suggesting that violence or aggression is an easy or appropriate solution to all problems.
- 12 In reporting or depicting violent crime, programmes will avoid glamourising it or promoting fear of crime.
- 13 Dangerous behaviour which is likely to be easily copied will only be shown when justified by the dramatic or editorial requirements of the programme, and not in programmes likely to be watched by large numbers of children.
- 14 The combination of violence and sex will be treated with special care. The graphic portrayal of violent sexual behaviour will rarely be justifiable.

### **Programme Information**

- 15 Broadcasters will provide viewers with as much information as possible about programmes which contain violent material so they can make informed decisions about what to watch. Information will include listings details, on-air trailers and on-air announcements.
- 16 Clear and unambiguous warnings about the content of a programme will be provided where there is a significant risk that viewers may otherwise be unprepared for material that may shock or upset them.
- 17 The development of EPGs and related equipment in the digital environment should include the means to provide this programme information to viewers where necessary.

## **Public Education**

- 18 Broadcasters, the ITC and the BSC, will work together with government, schools, universities and viewers' groups to increase public education about screen violence.
- 19 Information about research, programme content criteria and regulation, and other matters relevant to the issues covered by these principles, will be made publicly available on a regular basis.

## CHAPTER 3: THE EVIDENCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH

Consideration of the issues surrounding the portrayal of violence in broadcasting is always set against a backdrop of enduring public concern about the possible effect on viewers. This concern is heightened when a tragic event occurs such as the fatal shootings in Dunblane and the possible influence of the media, and in particular of the images presented on the television screen, is called into question.

As part of its task, the working party reviewed these concerns from a number of quarters in the light of current thinking and research (*see* Appendix 1 and also Cumberbatch and Howitt, 1989 and Gauntlett, 1995 for overviews of the studies described here).

### **The argument about 'effects'**

It is worth noting that much of the research in this field has been conducted in the US where the starting point is primarily behaviourist and laboratory-based. This tradition takes as its main premise the thought that the media - and television in particular - have a direct impact on the viewer or listener. This impact need not explicitly affect behaviour but may affect attitudes and so indirectly influence anti-social behaviour patterns. With their basis in the natural sciences, the American research projects assume that stable and verifiable effects may be noted between the different components of violent imagery, or in the variables affecting the viewer. With these measures in place, forecasts can be made.

This premise, upon which such 'effects' research is founded, suggests a greater uniformity of reaction (or 'effect') than most people would accept. It necessarily argues that if an effect is found in one viewer, then that effect may be replicated in other viewers, particularly if key variables are similar.

Within the UK, however, the tradition is to argue for a more active relationship between the viewer and the screen; the audience is considered not to be a homogeneous group but to be made up of groups of individuals with various experiences (see Browne and Pennell, 1998). That is not to say that certain attitudes held in common cannot be isolated, as is highlighted by the research described below. Experiments seeking to replicate some of the American laboratory-based projects have been undertaken in the UK, but most British research tends to be conducted by talking with and observing the viewer. Causal links are not proven, although influences on attitudes are acknowledged.

The range of proposed effects on viewers considered by researchers in the US and Britain are described below, together with the studies that have investigated them.

- 1 **Desensitisation** The argument is that the repeated viewing of violent material may desensitise the viewer to real-life violence, although this hypothesis does not necessarily argue that desensitisation creates violent behaviour. Recent research - some of which is reported on below - shows that the audience is well able to distinguish between fictional and factual television and comes to each type of material with a different set of expectations and, therefore, of reactions (eg, Morrison and McGregor, 1993; Andrew Irving Associates, 1997).
- 2 **Encouragement of aggressive responses** A number of studies have been conducted which purport to show that viewing violent material can make young children, and even college students, behave more aggressively or demonstrate more aggressive attitudes than they did before seeing such material. Critics of this argument suggest that the laboratory effect is far clearer than any televisual effect and that the studies generally illustrate the short-term effects of lasting change in either behaviour or manner: 'If it was assumed that the laboratory reflects the real world, it could be concluded that all programmes with any capacity to interest the viewer are in some way dangerous and should not be shown, and therefore that the only acceptable programmes are those of absolutely no interest to anyone' (Gauntlett, 1995).
- 3 **Catharsis** Early in the 1970s, some studies suggested that the viewing of violent material might have a cathartic effect. In 1971, for example, Feshbach and Singer split a sample of boys in residential schools into one group who watched violent programmes and another who watched non-violent programmes. At the end of the experiment, those who watched the non-aggressive material were noted to be more aggressive in social relations with their peers, while those who had watched violent programmes were largely unaffected. The researchers suggested that the violent material had in some way decreased aggressive behaviour that would have otherwise occurred. It has since been argued, however, that depriving the first group of their normal programmes could in itself have led to the increase in aggressive behaviour which was recorded.
- 4 **Cultivation effects** The American academic, George Gerbner, has argued strongly that those who watch a lot of television develop a distorted view of the world. His emphasis has been (most recently in 1986) on television's depiction of a violent world and the way in which that interacts with the viewer's concerns and fears about society. These studies have been queried, particularly by British researchers, and an attempt to replicate Gerbner's study in the UK was not successful (Gunter, 1987).
- 5 **Pro-social effects** There have been a number of studies which have sought to prove that television can have positive effects, for example, in terms of developing children's altruism. Many of these have shown that,

while television can be a useful way to impart information, and thereby possibly stimulate discussion, it does not seem to be a tool to change attitudes on its own. An American study (Johnston and Ettema, 1982) which tracked the views of children to a series of 'pro-social' programmes showed that attitudes did seem to change and that discussion enhanced this shift. A further finding was that those pro-social messages that were embedded in the most action-packed scenes were the ones that children recalled best.

- 6 **Advertising** An argument often put forward by the effects lobby is that the massive amount of money devoted to advertising would not be spent if advertising did not work, ie, if it did not make people buy things. However, as Gauntlett suggests: 'Advertising, by raising awareness of a product, is likely to have an effect on sales. But whether this counts as an 'effect' on the purchaser is another matter.' It is not clear that viewers purchase a product - as opposed to a particular brand of that product - simply because they have seen it on television. As a general rule, they need to be interested in buying the product in the first place for advertising to influence the brand they actually buy. What advertising does effectively is help build brand awareness, brand familiarity and brand confidence. On occasions it may play similar roles in relation to new products or services, but only when they are clearly branded. It also supports trends and fashions, which is certainly an influence on behaviour, although one which is strongly mediated by peer group pressure and affected by novelty or rarity appeal.

The British tradition, then, is to argue for 'influences' rather than 'causal effects', however indirect. It suggests that the viewer is not passive but interacts with the screen and what is seen. Much British research, described in some detail in Appendix 1, uses the audience's media sophistication and awareness of television to understand how viewers perceive and are affected by the events that are depicted. From this, there appears to be no evidence that television can make people do things they would not otherwise do.

Evidence also points to environmental features as being key in delinquent behaviour (see, most recently, Browne and Pennell, 1998). Gauntlett points to Barwise and Ehrenberg's comments (1988) that it is not that a causal effect between television violence and violent behaviour has not been proved, but that those who are involved in limiting actual violence such as psychiatrists or social workers tend not to take traditional media usage into account. The Gulbenkian Foundation sponsored a Commission into Children and Violence (1995) and noted, as have Browne and Pennell more recently, that the familial environment had by far the greatest effect on a person's eventual tendencies towards violence than any other measure (and even these could not be translated into absolutes as not all childhood victims become adult perpetrators). Where the media could play a role in relation to young viewers, the Commission argued, was in the way it depicted the resolution of conflicts and in its presentation of role models.

## **Audience attitude studies**

Several studies have been conducted in this country which have looked at the way in which audiences react to violent material on screen. These are described in some detail in Appendix 1, but there are a few unifying themes which are seen to affect audience attitudes:

First, the nature of the programme: is the violence factual or fictional? This is probably the key factor which affects the way in which respondents approach violent scenes and how they then evaluate them.

Second, the degree to which the audience relates to the scene, regardless of whether it is factual or fictional programming. This level of identification can be based on location, clothing, a feeling of contemporaneity, or even the recognition of cultural and other features.

Third, the use of dramatic techniques from fiction in factual programmes such as slow motion or music can be considered gratuitous. There are clear boundaries set on what should and should not be shown in factual material.

Fourth, the level of empathy felt with both victim and perpetrator in an act of violence is key to the way in which a scene is perceived.

Lastly, the respondent's own experiences are found to be important in the way in which violent material is approached. Those who themselves feel more vulnerable to violence are the least able to accept violent imagery.

## **New research**

The working party has also had early access to research completed in February 1998 and due to be published later this year. This was commissioned following a debate about the broad definition of 'violence' used for an analysis of violent incidents in television programmes conducted by the Department of Journalism Studies at Sheffield University for the BBC, the BSC, BSkyB, Channel 4, the ITVA and the ITC.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Gunter, B. and University of Sheffield Department of Journalism (1996) Violence on Television in Britain: A Content Analysis 1995-96, London: Independent Television Commission.

At a seminar hosted by the Broadcasting Standards Council in March 1997, practitioners challenged this definition and it was agreed that a further piece of qualitative work should be undertaken. The joint industry research initiative, which had commissioned the original content analysis, regrouped, with Channel 5, to commission further research to investigate what people mean when they talk about violence on television. Its aim was to understand better the way in which viewers approach the depiction of violence and to isolate those aspects which, while full of creative impact, might be considered less acceptable to the audience. The working party endorsed this approach as being central to its own work.

### *Defining violence*

The pilot study, involving 20 group discussions and a wide variety of respondents, was conducted by Andrew Irving Associates (AIA). It was obvious from this work that the definition used in the content analysis was too broad<sup>3</sup> and that there was little spontaneous mention of violence as a concern. Respondents make a clear distinction between those violent acts which are seen to be graphic, realistic and therefore shocking and those which are less real and therefore less disturbing, all of which would have been classed equally as 'violent' within the content analysis work. Into the former 'realistic' category falls much contemporary drama, while 'fantasy' films such as those featuring James Bond or even some Hollywood 'action' films are considered less real.

Individuals draw their boundaries at different places. AIA was able to demonstrate how the continuum ranges between those who might be termed violence 'enthusiasts' (almost exclusively male) and those who are described as violence 'rejecters' (almost exclusively female). Most of the respondent population falls between these two categories.

Once again, when defining what is meant by a 'violent depiction', respondents distinguish between factual violence which, because it is real, is thought to impart information and is therefore considered more acceptable than violence in fiction: 'Sometimes on the news there are scenes on that you do not want to watch but you make yourself watch... because you feel you should know what is going on.'

All respondents make a distinction between footage that can be shown before or after the watershed time of 9pm.

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<sup>3</sup> 'Any overt depiction of a credible threat of physical force or actual use of physical force, with or without a weapon, which is intended to harm or intimidate an animate being or group of animate beings. The violence may be carried out or merely attempted, and may or may not cause injury. Violence also includes any depiction of physically harmful consequences against an animate being (or group of beings) that occur as a result of unseen violent means.'

Other factors also come into play when considering a violent sequence: the relevance of the violence to the plot; the viewer's involvement or empathy with the victim; whether the viewer perceives that the violence is justified; the degree of inequality between the victim and the perpetrator; the degree of brutality shown; the way in which the camera is used. All of these variables make a sequence more or less violent and therefore more or less acceptable for broadcast.

### *Identifying violence*

These initial findings were developed in a further study by the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Leeds using a video editing technique pioneered there.<sup>4</sup> Using footage of transmitted (and, in some cases, untransmitted) material, groups of respondents were invited to edit the content for violence. At each stage their editing decisions were questioned by the researchers with the aim of achieving a clearer understanding of what constitutes 'violence' in respondents' minds.

The researchers distinguished between five types of violence:

- \* Choreographed violence: that seen in most Hollywood 'action' films or in some modern British drama;
- \* 'Television violence': that which is not realistic but is 'played up' for the camera;
- \* Violence in realistic fiction: usually contemporary drama, and sometimes soap operas, with characters and locations with which the viewer can identify;
- \* Comic violence: slapstick comedy and 'traditional' animation;
- \* Violence in actuality: factual footage, either from the news or documentary.

One of the key findings of the study is that all violence, fictional or real, is judged against a set of rules or parameters defined by reality. The differentiated personal experiences of respondents affect what these rules might be, but a common code exists. There are also rules based on what might be expected of particular television programmes, of a particular transmission time and of a genre of programming.

As with the AIA study, respondents reacted very differently to factual violence and violence in television fiction. While response to the factual accounts is governed by a sense of duty and the feeling that knowledge of the 'real world' is important, fictional violence is in most cases understood as a construct. The researchers went on to

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<sup>4</sup> Methodological details will be given in the report to be published later in 1998.

hypothesise certain additional factors which affected how great the violence in a scene is perceived to be.

To explain these factors, the researchers described a further series of principles, which were (i) generic to style, (ii) relating to the audience's own sentiments and values, and (iii) deriving from viewership.

(i) Principles generic to style

- \* Perhaps the most important factor here is that respondents only identify the act of violence as 'violence'. Neither the impression of violence nor the aftermath of violence would form part of a strict definition, in their terms. In certain cases, language could be considered 'violent'.

- \* The more personal the contact between victim and perpetrator, the more violent the scene is perceived to be. A depiction of someone being beaten or kicked is considered more violent than a scene in which a gun or weapon is used.

- \* The repeated use of violence and the duration of the violent act is an important factor. If the violence used is particularly cruel or vicious, that is a key determinant for respondents in their definition of an act as 'violent'.

- \* Although respondents do not define the consequences of violence as 'violence', the perceived effect on the victim is important, especially during the assault. This is particularly true if respondents feel that the victim and perpetrator are unfairly matched and that the victim cannot adequately protect himself or herself. However the researchers stress: 'The fact that such injury (a scene from a news report) is not defined as violence does not make the scene inconsequential.'

- \* The setting of the violence and its realism also heighten the perception of violence. Sound effects are mentioned by respondents as being important to the perceived violence of a scene.

- \* Humour diminishes the perceived violence within a scene.

(ii) Principles relating to the audience's sentiments and values

- \* This set of principles is concerned much more with the way in which the respondent's personal experiences and attitudes affect their viewing. The status of the victim is key here with issues such as the relative power structures taking on importance, and the level of empathy felt with the victim.

(iii) Principles deriving from viewership

Respondents look at the violent act as belonging to one of three forms:

- \* Playful violence: this can be comic, highly choreographed, or a dramatic device, but not one that is meant to be taken seriously. Using terminology derived from the AIA study, this is described as violence with a small 'v'.
- \* Depicted violence: this is designed to be realistic. To gain this effect, however, it is often seen to be exaggerated, as in much cinema violence. This violence is defined as big 'V'.
- \* Authentic violence: acts of violence within this form are normally labelled as big 'V' because they reflect a world and a structure that the respondent can recognise and perhaps identify with.

The researchers argue that, for many respondents, their perceptions of real violence are coloured by the way in which violence and injury, in particular, are represented on screen. For many, this is their most vivid experience of violence in society. Those respondents who have experienced real violence point to the fact that it is often short in duration, and the sound effects are nothing like those encountered in television programmes.

## **Implications**

What these most recent studies point to, once again, is the sophistication of the audience and the level of discrimination and appreciation that has built up for the medium of television. In a draft report, the Leeds research team refer to this: 'Violence has been producer driven, with the corollary that definitions of violence are little more than the viewer feeding back the producer's own definition of violence. The viewer has learnt to read the signs of violence to produce a classificatory system that is consonant with a specific type of violence.'

The re-emphasis on the audience's active relationship with the medium within this large-scale study confirms many of the findings of the projects discussed in Appendix 1. Public concern remains for those who are vulnerable but, when presented with transmitted material, respondents are found to make clear judgements as to whether or not an incident can be considered 'violent' and, if so, the degree of violence it is felt to portray.

However, the working party remains convinced of the need for continuing research to monitor changing attitudes and to provide working tools for regulation which enable decision-makers to reflect audience concerns. It therefore endorses the joint industry approach pioneered in the Sheffield and Leeds studies reported here and urges the broadcasters to continue to work together with the BBC, ITC and BSC to improve definitions of violence and to investigate further the boundary between the acceptable and unacceptable depiction of violent scenes on television.

## **Scheduling of programmes**

These studies also point to the expectations of the audience about the scheduling of programmes. There is near-universal knowledge of the watershed and respondents in other recent research projects display a detailed awareness of the way in which programming content changes in the period leading up to it, and after it: 'When considering hypothetical programmes, respondents took their cues quite clearly from the programme descriptions and used their knowledge of similar programmes to slot these hypotheticals into a schedule - both the time of day and the day of the week in most cases.'<sup>5</sup>

Such is the sophistication of the audience that individual scenes can affect attitudes to a whole programme: 'If a disparity between the expected transmission time of a programme and the respondent's perception of a suitable time for that programme was seen, it was often driven by individual incidents within the programme. This did not necessarily colour respondents' views about the entire programme (or series) but flagged an area of possible concern.'

From that study, and others since,<sup>6</sup> the working party noted that the audience is increasingly asking for more and better information about programmes. Research respondents want this in a clear and unambiguous form so that they can make informed choices about what they will view. The following chapter develops this call from the audience to make decisions based on adequate information and an understanding of the policies observed by British broadcasters.

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## **CHAPTER 4: INFORMATION FOR VIEWERS: THE WATERSHED, WARNINGS AND CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS**

The working party reviewed information provision to viewers under three main headings:

- information about the watershed
- information about the content of specific programmes
- systems of classification

There is considerable anecdotal and research evidence that viewers are keen to be given more and better quality information about programme content and scheduling policies in order to make informed choices about viewing for themselves and their children.

### **Information about the watershed**

As a prior step to consideration of how to improve such provision, the working party requested substantial information from a range of broadcasters on:

- their current editorial and compliance procedures for programmes containing violence;
- their policies and practice on broadcasting information, warnings and trailers relating to such content.

### *Compliance procedures*

Broadcasters supplied the working party with clear evidence of the seriousness with which decisions to broadcast violent material are treated. All were able to demonstrate carefully planned vetting and upward referral systems to ensure the suitability of material for the scheduled time of broadcasting. Mechanisms are designed to make certain that the most difficult material is not only subjected to the most rigorous checks and double-checks but is considered at very senior levels in the broadcast companies for a final decision on its suitability for transmission.

In setting out these procedures, broadcasters made clear their observance of the relevant codes and guidelines regarding the portrayal of violence. They also showed their commitment to scheduling material in accordance with the watershed, the time before which all programming should be suitable for a family audience. Indeed, they continue to edit certain scenes from violent or overly explicit feature films even after the watershed.

### *Awareness of the watershed*

The watershed is a system of programme classification with progressive gradations before and after 9pm which has been in use by broadcasters and regulators for nearly 30 years. It has achieved a high level of viewer awareness in recent years, with nearly nine out of ten viewers who are parents - and a similar percentage of all viewers - knowing about the policy.

While these figures are gratifyingly high, the working party believes that the application of the watershed is not understood in sufficient detail and needs further reinforcement by the broadcasters.

Although the vast majority of viewers can identify the 9pm watershed, it is clear from letters and telephone calls that some interpret it as a belief on the part of broadcasters and regulators that children are in bed by that time and that, after 9pm, 'anything goes'. This is far from the truth, on both counts.

It is important that viewers understand fully the fundamental principle of shared responsibility between parents and broadcasters which underlies the concept of the 9pm watershed. Broadcasters should devise generic promotions, suitable for their services, to educate and inform viewers about the policy and the idea of gradualism which permits more adult programming to be broadcast as the evening progresses.

Broadcasters should also open up a dialogue with the many listings providers about the inclusion of generic information on the watershed from time to time alongside the television listings.

### **Information about the content of specific programmes**

The working party reviewed the means by which UK viewers currently receive specific programme content information. The primary source, across the whole schedule, is listings information, whether from newspapers, television listings magazines and other publications, or teletext services. In addition, they are told about programme content in promotional trailers and in on-air warnings, the latter primarily in audio directly preceding specific programmes.

### *Listings*

The amount of specific information about violent or other difficult content in programmes which can be incorporated in listings is very much a product of the space available. In a multi-channel environment, print publications and teletext services are

under pressure to include the schedule details of an ever-increasing number of services, with the result that individual programme information is squeezed out. The main exception to this is feature films. Owing to the popularity of viewing films on television, many information providers offer discrete sections covering the day or week's films and scope exists therefore to indicate potentially problematic material. Unfortunately, the same opportunity does not exist in the case of other fictional or factual programming, some of which might also pose problems of acceptability for the general audience.

The working party recommends that the broadcasters should work with all types of listings providers to improve the usefulness of information on specific programmes (including information on the watershed as mentioned above) and to encourage them to provide sufficient space for this purpose.

### *Electronic Programme Guides*

A new form of listings information will emerge in the digital environment when Electronic Programme Guides (EPGs) become the means by which viewers select channels, services and programmes. Accessed through the remote control, these listings will make it possible for parents to block out certain films, for example, from Pay-Per-View (PPV) or (Near) Video on Demand (NVOD) services. In these cases, access will be given only when the correct PIN number is used, so that children should be unable to purchase or view inappropriate films without parental consent.

The working party encourages broadcasters to work together to consider the ways in which EPGs could enhance the supply of programme information in order to meet viewers' desire for guidance about potentially offensive or disturbing material, including violence. One proposal is to provide the viewer with a coded warning for sex, violence or bad language (called 'reason codes') which will follow the EPG's brief description of each programme's content.

As with any such experiments in providing information to the audience, the working party suggests that the use of electronic methods, especially when combined with a parental control for more specialised channels, should be properly assessed. Their introduction must in no way undermine the established contract between broadcaster and viewer represented by the watershed policy.

### *Trailers*

As far as the information contained in trailers is concerned, the working party found some common and some contrasting aspects in the broadcasters' approaches.

It looked at the use of trailers for programmes with violent content, and in particular those broadcast prior to 9pm for post-9pm films and programmes. From a range viewed, it found that broadcasters are, on the whole, succeeding in communicating the nature of the programme's content without the use of inappropriate imagery or audio. Most broadcasters have a policy of time-coding such trailers to ensure that they are not shown, for example, when children are most likely to be viewing. Others adopt a policy of making sure, for ease of scheduling, that all trailers are suitable for broadcast at any time. The working party did find, inevitably, that there are quite high volumes of trailers for more adult programmes which are transmitted before the watershed. Some are more successful than others in their scripting in alerting viewers to their suitability or otherwise for children. This requires subtlety if trailers are not to act as a lure to children.

In the light of the evidence considered, the working party decided that on-air trailers, while imparting some useful information about the nature of programmes, are primarily a promotional device to encourage viewers to switch on. As such, there is very limited potential to extend these as a means of advising viewers - especially close to transmission - of particularly difficult content.

### *Warnings*

The majority of advisory announcements prior to programmes with violent content are categorised as 'warnings'. These are not normally expected to occur for pre-watershed programmes because material unsuitable for children is not supposed to be transmitted before 9pm (or 8pm on premium encrypted subscription channels). However, it was apparent that some broadcasters, responding to viewers' preferences, were extending the use of announcements at the start of programmes as 'information' rather than necessarily constituting a 'warning' in the accepted sense.

The working party welcomes this development. Though mindful of the risk that too frequent advisory information can diminish its impact, it urges the broadcasters to continue to improve the amount and quality of advice they give to viewers. For example, it found that the wording of some warnings was unnecessarily elliptical. Descriptions applied to programmes such as 'hard-hitting', 'candid' and 'uncompromising' are too vague to be of any real use. Broadcasters still have some way to go in increasing the transparency of wording to ensure that viewers clearly recognise warnings about material which may upset or concern them (whether sexual, violent or involving strong language). Viewers need specific information on which they can act. Broadcasters have to find ways of delivering this, while avoiding forms which turn information into an inducement to younger viewers.

### *The use of symbols*

Some UK broadcasters have adopted limited ratings systems, although these are mainly confined to feature films and acquired film material. BSkyB has experimented with various systems involving a caption giving the time or, latterly, the age group for which the film is suitable. Channel 5 has also adopted a system of symbols and limited description to guide the audience in relation to films.

While the working party does not wish to discourage the adoption of these techniques if broadcasters judge that they are helpful to their viewers, it believes that they have certain drawbacks. Symbols are a very basic and limited mechanism which may not be as effective as a specific description of problematic content. They apply to a limited proportion of the output and thus can give the impression that this is the only material which is in effect graded for child or adult viewing. This is not, of course, the case for any UK broadcaster.

### *Teletext information*

The working party is encouraged by discussions it initiated with the broadcasters about the use of teletext to improve the range and clarity of on-air warnings and information announcements.<sup>7</sup> It strongly recommends the adoption of this new proposal to reinforce the verbal warnings given at the beginning of programmes.

This scheme would make it possible for teletext service providers to replicate a warning in what is described as an 'in-box' overlaying the television picture. This could operate in a similar way to subtitles in that there might be a dedicated page which viewers could call up at any time if they had missed the start of a programme and wanted to check whether there was violent or other difficult material of which they should be aware.

It is possible that the dedicated page number would appear on screen as the verbal warning or announcement was made. On commercial services, it could appear again on returning to the programme after a commercial break. The broadcasters would need to ensure that the public are widely informed about the availability of this service once it is up and running.

Key advantages of this system are that it does not involve a mandatory symbol on screen throughout a programme causing irritation to viewers or acting as an instant attraction to children zapping through channels. However, it does allow viewers to inform themselves of potentially difficult content regardless of the point at which they join a programme.

There will be further issues to consider when digital text services are launched next year. Unlikely to have page numbers, these new services may offer a more interactive

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<sup>7</sup> This had been proposed by a Citizens' Jury of viewers set up by the ITC in 1997 to consider regulatory issues.

way of going straight to programme-related text. The working party has opened discussions with text providers and broadcasters on the implications of such developments.

The working party has secured the agreement of ITV, the BBC, Channel 4, Channel 5 and BSkyB to work with the relevant text service providers towards implementing this initiative for existing services. A common page number or similar means of accessing such guidance needs to be identified (akin to page 888 for subtitles) for ease of use. It is recommended that other UK-based broadcasters carrying text services adopt the same proposal.

### **Systems of classification**

As part of its consideration of the merits of programme classification, the working party discussed with broadcasters the possibility of introducing a system in the UK similar to those which operate in other countries. Australia, for example, has used a single classification system for film, video and television requiring spoken and on-screen consumer advice since 1993. France introduced television classification in 1996 using on-screen symbols.

The countries which employ such systems tend to be those which have no history of a family viewing policy or scheduling watershed. British television has pioneered these concepts and, as already stated, this has led to a well-established compact between broadcasters and viewers. In circumstances where schedules built by broadcasters rather than individual viewers look set to continue for some years, the working party believes that it would be difficult to envisage a common national ratings system which would improve on the UK's current family viewing policy.

#### *The American experience*

Much has been made of the debate in the United States, where classification was introduced in 1997 using an age-rated system modelled on that of the film industry which also provides information about content. What is less widely known is that broadcasters there agreed to a system of voluntary classification in order to stave off the introduction of a watershed policy. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) expects that televisions carrying the selective 'blocking' technology known as the V-chip, accompanied by general coding of programmes, will be available in large numbers by July 1999. Clearly, classification and an associated electronic blocking technology are regarded as an acceptable substitute for an effective family viewing policy.

However, the American experience reveals highly subjective and contradictory ratings for the same programme given by different broadcasters in different states. NBC, one of the major networks, has still not implemented the latest American content ratings system on the grounds that it is too complex and confusing. What is more, the system often seems designed to draw children towards unsuitable programming rather than protect them from it.

### *V-chip technology*

As in the US and Canada, some recently introduced classification systems are designed eventually to be used with the V-chip, the idea being that this technology will replace the responsible parent in the room by enabling families to block receipt of inappropriate transmissions. The V-chip will be attached in a separate box or incorporated within the body of new standard television sets. However, trials in Canada, the country that pioneered the V-chip, indicate a number of problems and there is still no time frame for its widespread introduction there. It could be months - or even years - before an effective device is achieved, despite the optimistic predictions of the FCC in the US.

The first challenge is to make the chip impregnable to tampering by those it is designed to protect. In order to make the blocking kit comprehensible to adults, researchers have repeatedly produced systems that children can understand and outwit within a very short time. A recent proposal is to encase the back of the television in a steel box and use a pin number - a strategy unlikely to be foolproof for a technically adept adolescent. The second difficulty, perhaps even more significant, is the dependence on an uncertain software package. Problems remain in encoding programmes prior to transmission. At one point in the Canadian trials, the V-chip blocked out national hockey games and left some inappropriate films unscrambled.

Even if these problems were to be resolved, the working party believes it would take many years for the technology to become standard in British homes. Recent American research has shown that although nearly two-thirds of parents say they would use the V-chip to block inappropriate programmes, most would not rush to buy a new television set containing the device once it becomes available. Meanwhile, research in the UK indicates that, on average, households replace their television sets once every 10 years and, typically, older sets are given to children for their use. It also suggests that more than 60 per cent of 10- to 16-year-olds now have televisions in their bedrooms. Children whose viewing is unsupervised, or whose families cannot afford the latest technology, will be put at risk if, with the excuse of the V-chip behind them, broadcasters are encouraged to relax the standards on which we currently rely. The V-chip would therefore be an inadequate 'quick-fix' solution which would not protect the most vulnerable viewers.

The working party has concluded that the public's concern for these viewers is best addressed by retaining and strengthening the present family viewing policy. While the broadcaster can never replace the conscientious parent, the current watershed system gives viewer and broadcaster shared responsibility for viewing.

Even in a digital environment, most broadcasters will be delivering a built schedule to viewers for the foreseeable future. In addition, the evidence suggests that although the introduction of digital television will make multi-channel television more widely available, this will not necessarily lead to viewers' rapid abandonment of the mass audience channels or the most popular current cable and satellite services. The four main terrestrial channels have remained extremely popular even in multi-channel homes and still account for two-thirds of viewing despite the wider choice on offer. A new equilibrium may well be reached for multi-channel television between generalist and other channels.

The precipitate introduction of a national classification system as the means of regulating the new digital channels would risk introducing a young audience to unsuitable programming from which it is currently protected. Such a blanket classification system could become a fig leaf for broadcasters, absolving them of their current scheduling and content monitoring obligations and putting all responsibility on the viewers, and especially parents, at home.

### *Content regulation*

It has been argued that the introduction of the V-chip, and the classification system that would accompany it, might eventually result in the abolition of all content regulation. If this were to happen, broadcasters might be less inclined to exercise restraint in their choice of material and the current valuable consensus about editorial standards which exists in the UK would be likely to disappear, to the detriment of the television audience.

Similarly, it might appear that the projected convergence between broadcasting, computers and telecommunications which would deliver services, information, entertainment and culture through a single screen, would inevitably diminish the role for regulation. There is firm evidence, however, that public concerns existing now will remain, especially in relation to violence and harmful material. Thus convergence does not alter the objectives of regulation, although it may change the ways in which it can be achieved.

Having said that, projections about the accelerated take-up of Internet services, particularly for viewing video, may yet prove exaggerated. It is important not to be misled by examples from across the Atlantic. The hugely different histories of cable television and the newspaper industry in the US and the UK provide sufficient reason for caution.

At present, according to a survey of Internet and online users published in December 1997, households owning personal computers (PCs) account for less than 25 per cent of UK homes, with domestic penetration of the Internet at around 7 per cent. Viewers may increasingly gain access to the Internet, or at least parts of it, on their televisions, for example via set-top boxes, but it is difficult to estimate the impact of this development, as at present the services which may be offered by this route are not well defined.

However, even if in the future - and certainly far beyond the scope of this current report - all electronic communication were eventually to come through a unified box, it does not follow that content control would disappear altogether. Television programming will continue to be a major enterprise largely run by sizeable corporations, as susceptible as any other to regulation and public pressure. Current projections suggest that the main players are likely to continue to have names very similar to those familiar to today's viewers well into the next century. At present, for example, the top 20 most visited UK-based Internet sites are provided by well-known publishers and broadcasters. Whether or not a major broadcaster chooses to transmit over the Internet, the role of regulation in controlling violence on television will continue to be of concern. Regulatory approaches will need to evolve, building on existing valued structures but adapting to the technological realities of a converging communications sector.

By its very nature, the Internet is difficult to regulate; content may be provided by any user and material may be accessed by a variety of routes. Safeguards put in place to prevent access to sites which contain extremely violent material, or material which incites violence, cannot be totally effective. Work is going on, however, to ensure that responsible content and service providers can offer better protected sites which are adequately supervised.

There are currently three practical ways of helping users access the World Wide Web with greater confidence:

- a 'walled garden' approach, as employed by many UK teachers who only allow their pupils access to a limited number of pages at school;
- a 'white' list, where access is limited to an approved list of sites provided by a third party;
- a known and trusted content provider who brings established values from other media to the Internet.

However, despite the continuous efforts of responsible suppliers to moderate content, not all sites which contain bulletin boards and live chat can be subject to regular

scrutiny so that offensive material is withdrawn swiftly. Research into ways of protecting children using the Internet continues to be a priority.

There will be particular concerns about that minority of programme output which is provided on a more ad hoc cottage-industry basis where the regulatory mechanisms cannot be expected to work so stringently and self-regulation is likely to be the only possibility. Self-rating is unreliable and needs checking; however, third-party rating can be expensive and labour intensive. Even rating and classification will provide no panacea since, as with the V-chip, technically adept and unsupervised children are likely to be able to circumvent settings made on an individual browser. It should be noted that the proportion of pages which has been classified is very small and getting smaller as the Web expands.

A key issue is how far self-regulation carried out by content and/or service providers within the industry can be effective and whether there are any further safeguards which could help meet public concerns. The recently established Internet Watch Foundation is one such industry-funded initiative. This is currently subject to UK government review focusing on its work, its structure and composition, and the effectiveness of its arrangements for dealing with potentially illegal material and for protecting the public from legal but potentially harmful material.

UNESCO has also commissioned an international pilot survey from the Australian Broadcasting Authority comparing the regulatory approaches to the Internet taken by Australia, Malaysia, Singapore and the UK. The European Commission, too, is encouraging international debate to consider the many issues raised. However, policy-makers must be wary of harbouring unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved in this international and highly dynamic medium. There is no place for complacency; technology alone cannot solve the problem of screen violence.

In moving towards the digital age, the bulwarks of our broadcasting regulation need to be safeguarded rather than eroded. All newcomers to the UK broadcasting arena should be expected to comply with existing standards of regulation where this is appropriate to the service they supply. The working party believes that regulators and broadcasters should build on the strengths of the current watershed classification system, through information and education initiatives as outlined elsewhere in this report.

As the number and take-up of new and varied digital services grow, however, the working party believes it will be necessary to revisit the issues raised in this report on a more regular basis. It is likely that a graduated approach to regulating the portrayal of violence will need to be developed, depending on the type of service which is offered, its general availability and the extent to which the user is able to control its reception. The working party therefore recommends that the close collaboration which this current initiative represents be continued so that new concerns about

violence on television which may result from changes in the broadcasting environment can be fully addressed.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE ROLE OF MEDIA EDUCATION**

The long-term value of appropriate education for promoting critical viewing skills is not in doubt. Every viewer brings to every viewing the benefits and the burdens of past experience, including those gained through education. Relevant media education from an early age can prepare children not only to handle media violence to which they may be exposed, but to be better informed and more effective citizens and parents.

The working party's review of research literature earlier in this report underlined at several points the significance of school education in developing critical viewing skills. For example, the distinguishing of factual from fictional material is a skill already taught in primary schools from the age of seven, especially in developing effective speaking and listening among pupils. The five types of violence identified in the Leeds University study ('choreographed' violence, violence 'played up' for the camera, realistic fiction, comic violence and violence in actuality) themselves suggest topics that teachers, and indeed parents, could raise with children of primary school age. Discussion and project work would develop skills in English language and literature, as well as those in media literacy.

In this final section of the report, the emphasis throughout is on partnership. This is not only the partnership between 'service provider and service viewer' mentioned in the introduction, but that between all those concerned to encourage children's skills as future citizens - notably teachers, parents, community leaders and workers and, indeed, broadcasters themselves.

As part of the working party's consideration of how media education could address such concerns, it looked first at how other societies are using it in their approaches to the issue of televised violence, and then considered the relevance of these activities for Britain.

### **Media Education in the US**

In his 1997 State of the Union address, President Clinton declared that his first priority for the next four years was to ensure that Americans had the best education in the world. This was seen as a movement requiring the mobilisation of society as a whole. As the US Department of Education put it: 'He issued a ten-point call to action... to enlist parents, teachers, students, business leaders and local and state officials.'

The fourth of the ten points challenged parents to get involved very early in their children's learning which 'begins long before he or she goes to school'. It referred to the Vice-President's (and Mrs Gore's) Sixth Family Reunion Conference in June 1997 (further details of which can be found in Appendix 2). This emphasised the crucial

importance to education of full parental involvement, from the earliest years, in their child's development - an approach which underpins many of the recent key approaches to media education in the US.

This is reflected in the support material on offer from broadcasters themselves. Through its web site, the well-known Boston station WGBH, promotes a thorough and sophisticated approach to practical help for parents of young children. The aim is to encourage 'tuning into your kids', by creating conversations that transform viewing from a passive activity into a valuable tool to 'support positive family experiences'. Strategies are outlined to enrich the educational value of children's viewing by helping them to understand and learn from what they see and hear.

WGBH is one of 349 'public broadcasting service' (PBS) non-commercial television stations in the US belonging to the national PBS organisation, whose key aim is to serve member stations with programmes and services of the highest quality and the imaginative use of technology 'to advance education, culture and citizenship'. This is not mere rhetoric. PBS stations are predominantly community (51%) or educational (32%) organisations, relying on donations from viewers and local business for more than a third of their operating costs. Their links with the local community are vital to their survival, not just in terms of direct income, but in keeping viewing figures to a level high enough to retain state and similar funding. In 1997, the average viewing household watched PBS television for just under three hours weekly.

Partnerships at every level - national, regional and local - are therefore crucial to the survival and health of these stations. Public television was able to respond swiftly to the President's 1997 call to action on education, adapting national policy to local or regional needs. Many recent 'TV violence' or 'media education' initiatives have similarly derived from national concerns about youth violence and youth employment - issues with clear parallels in Britain and elsewhere.

The US Government's Department of Education has encouraged these activities with the publication of simple media education guides, as have organisations such as the National Association of Elementary School Principals. Similarly the California-based Just Think Foundation, set up in 1995 with major financial support from Disney, aims to 'create innovative solutions' to teaching the effects of media violence through media education. But the energy and maturity of the media education movement in the US is perhaps best exemplified by an event such as this summer's National Media Education Conference in Colorado Springs. This is hosted by an organisation called the Partnership for Media Education, whose sponsors include Discovery Communications as well as government agencies and national charities. Clearly government media organisations, together with business, have opened a national campaign that has drawn in teachers, community workers and parents and which depends for its success on vigorous leadership and a wide range of partnerships.

The same is true of recent initiatives in other countries. Some rely more heavily on new legislation, or on revised school curricula or on the proposed V-chip technology than the Americans. Others lay greater emphasis on concerns about the perceived future threat of violent or other undesirable material on the Internet. All share with the Americans a renewed emphasis on media education, in the broadest and simplest sense, as a key element in developing the tools to handle media violence. All recognise that the swiftest and most effective way forward is to develop a national strategy that draws in all relevant parties in society, rather than relying alone on new technology or on government or broadcaster action.<sup>8</sup>

### **Media Education in Britain**

Britain's broadcasting system is now even more of a curiosity on the world scene than ten years ago, with a unique range of high-quality programmes produced by the major channels. Perhaps because of its long history of public service broadcasting, the UK has hitherto regarded media education as less centrally important than other countries. However, as doubts increase about the effectiveness of extended classification systems or electronic blocking mechanisms in the multi-channel environment, the idea of education to develop 'critical viewing skills' becomes more attractive. The rise of similar concerns about the influence of the Internet, a medium more free from regulation than television, has added further urgency to this issue. The efforts, therefore, to develop media education on a national scale evident in other countries, and especially the US, have a clear relevance to those concerned with the future direction of broadcasting in the UK.

#### *Material for schools*

The British Film Institute (BFI) has for some years been developing and circulating a draft model for the integration of media education into the mandatory curriculum for 5- to 16-year-olds. Entitled Mapping Media in the Curriculum, this describes three conceptual areas: Media Languages (“each medium has its own devices and conventions for making meaning”), Media Producers and Audiences (“... to identify where messages are coming from and what motivates them”) and Media Messages and Values (“the media can affect our thoughts and behaviour”).

These areas of study frequently feature in courses for secondary school pupils and for those in further and higher education. However, we would argue that much younger children who, of course, also watch large amounts of television, should be encouraged to gain understanding and skills in each of these areas, and especially the last.

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<sup>8</sup> More information about initiatives is provided in Appendix 2.

The curricular reforms of the 1980s left little room for the inclusion of media education at school level, although there is a reference to media literacy within the reading (and speaking) targets for English from the age of seven and for older children. In other parts of the UK there are themes (for example, in Northern Ireland's Education for Mutual Understanding curriculum) that are very appropriate to media education, but most of them tend to relate to study at secondary level. There is a relative dearth of teaching or study material for primary schools and especially the younger age groups. This contrasts with the situation in the US, and indeed many other countries, where the value of developing such skills from a young age seems to be better recognised.

Schools television in Britain, which has an extremely high reputation with teachers for quality and reliability, includes much relevant material. But since these services are designed to attract teachers through responding to curricular demands, this is again mainly at secondary level. BBC Schools and Channel 4 Schools Television have a long tradition of offering media education at this level and an awareness of the explosion in demand for media studies places at university has encouraged new ventures. The working party's analysis of 1997/98 programmes on offer to British schools reflects this and reveals many with direct relevance or potential application for media education (Appendix 2 lists details of these). However, most have more to do with promoting understanding and criticism of television and film than specifically helping teachers to develop 'critical viewing skills' among younger viewers.

### *Other initiatives*

In addition to this broadcasting output, there are some other relevant initiatives. For the education of younger children, the 'Devon Project', reported on at a 1996 British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) conference by its Director, Tim Arnold, should be mentioned. Sponsored by Devon County Council Education and the University of Exeter, this aims to demystify television for 8- to 10-year-olds and to improve general behaviour (in the playground and elsewhere) and social skills in the process. The project derives from the work of Professor Tom Van der Voort at the University of Leiden, who also spoke at the BBFC event.

Similarly, the internationally respected media education tradition in British universities includes much work which could be applicable for younger age groups. For instance, Len Masterman at the University of Nottingham (author of *Teaching the Media*), has devised many relevant exercises and activities for use in schools.

Other organisations are already at work in this area. The NSPCC issued a useful pamphlet on screen violence aimed at parents in mid-1997. The BBFC 1996-97 Annual Report included in its agenda for the future an intention to promote a long-term programme of media education about classification and censorship, along the lines of a pilot scheme it ran in schools in 1996. And the British Video Association

is currently developing a media literacy teaching pack called Reel Lives, including a video for classroom use, for free distribution to primary schools.

Most recently, the report of the Film Policy Review Group, set up by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, Chris Smith, and co-chaired by Government Minister Tom Clarke and Stewart Till of Polygram, included a proposal for 'a new joint initiative by Government and industry to boost film education, especially in schools'. This is to be coordinated by the BFI, working within a strategy to be set by a working group representing the industry, education bodies and the relevant government departments.

### **The way forward**

British viewers in the 21st century will be faced with a greater degree of choice than ever before. Whatever the extent of our future reliance upon regulation, self-regulation, information provision or even selective blocking mechanisms to allow parents and guardians to regulate the family menu, the development of appropriate critical viewing skills from the earliest possible age is long overdue.

The working party therefore calls on all those concerned to build on existing activity and develop a national strategy for media education, especially of young children, by all available means. It is recommended that an industry group comprising regulators, broadcasters and programme-makers be set up to develop appropriate initiatives and partnerships with other bodies, coordinated as necessary with those with similar educational objectives in film, video and related media.

Key roles can be seen for government, broadcasters, teachers and parents as follows:

\* Government has already expressed its determination to develop education and training in Britain to create more adaptable, confident and capable citizens in the 21st century. Media education is an idea whose time has come, one that could and should promote some of the very skills the government and the people most wish to see the young acquire at an early age.

\* British broadcasters have an important role to play in promoting the strategy itself, both on and off air. The particular record of regional ITV licensees in maintaining their community education officer staff (first established in response to regulatory demands in the early 1980s) has some parallels with American public television activities. There are similar 'partnerships' with local and national bodies in the UK and there have occasionally been well-planned and impressively wide-ranging campaigns. BBC Schools and Channel 4 Schools have excellent relevant experience and a very high reputation with teachers. Building on these strengths, and their growing alliances with

publishers and others, they would be able to respond powerfully to play their part in implementing the strategy.

\* Educational reforms have brought teachers into closer and more regular contact with the families of their pupils. A national strategy should aim to build on this partnership, and on strands within existing curricula, to enlist the support of teachers for improving children's skills that fit so well with other aspects of development.

\* Finally, and most importantly, as in the American experience, home-based learning and practice will be essential to successful media education of the young, with a central role for parenting. The encouragement of family-focused media education will require resources for a determined, long-running campaign. As elsewhere in implementing the strategy, partnerships with other agencies will be vital.

## **NOTE ON APPENDICES**

The Joint Working Party has drawn on a range of information sources in carrying out its review of concerns about violence on television both in the UK and elsewhere.

Many of these, such as the relevant codes and guidelines, are in the public domain and available as follows:

British Broadcasting Corporation  
BBC Shop Belfast  
21A Arthur Street  
Belfast BT1 4GA  
Tel. 01232 325672

Broadcasting Standards Commission  
7 The Sanctuary  
London SW1P 3JS  
Tel. 0171 233 0544

Independent Television Commission  
Information Office  
33 Foley Street  
London W1P 7LB  
Tel. 0171 255 3000

Details about the classification systems used by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) and Video Standards Council (VSC) can be obtained as follows:

British Board of Film Classification  
3 Soho Square  
London W1V 6HD  
Tel. 0171 439 7961

Video Standards Council  
Kinetic Business Centre  
Theobald Street  
Borehamwood  
Herts WD6 4PJ  
Tel. 0181 387 4020

For those requiring further information on the sources used in the report, the following appendices are available on application to the Independent Television Commission at the address above.

Appendix 1: Research - Papers relating to published material on effects and attitudinal research into the portrayal of violence on television.

Appendix 2: Media Education - Source material on initiatives in the US, Canada and elsewhere taken from the Internet and details of relevant programmes from BBC Schools and Channel 4 Schools.

Appendix 3: Other references.