

VIOLENT TV PROGRAMMING AND ITS IMPACT ON CHILDREN

Michigan State University

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The Quello Center has invited Dr. Bradley S. Greenberg, University Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Communication, Telecommunication, Information Systems & Media at Michigan State University to comment on the April 25, 2007 FCC report dealing with Violent Television Programming and Its Impact on Children. That report said that action should be taken to address violent programming. What follows are key conclusions and recommendations from the report, followed by Dr. Greenberg's comments.

...The FCC report concludes that "there is strong evidence that exposure to violence in the media can increase aggressive behavior in children, at least in the short run (p. 21)."

Dr. Greenberg: This conclusion has been proposed by responsible social scientists studying violence in the media for the past 20 years. Disagreement is practically nil.

There is equally strong research evidence that exposure to violent content in film and videogames as well as television increases aggressive behavior in teenagers and adults. Further, there is increasing evidence that the relationship is causal—that such exposure contributes to those factors that create aggressive behaviors.

For those doing the primary research in this area, the past two decades have included considerable research to identify those factors which may mitigate or enhance the relationship between watching violence and aggressive responses. Some factors that have been identified include the attractiveness of the perpetrator, justification for the violence, and whether it is rewarded or not.

...Another recommendation is for the re-establishment of a 'family viewing' hour, i.e., the first hour of evening prime time, e.g., 8-9 p.m. EST, as a time frame in which violence is absent.

Dr. Greenberg: This would be useful for the youngest viewers, but older children and teenagers are not prone to such an early bedtime. One concern is whether the shows with violent content in that time frame would be replaced primarily with sexual content.

... One major recommendation of the report includes making available 'ala carte' options in subscribing to cable television, i.e., selecting some channels and blocking out those with more violent content.

Dr. Greenberg: This is unlikely to alter violence viewing patterns because most consumers choose to have all the available broadcast networks among their cable options and that those networks (e.g., ABC, FOX) still attract a large proportion of all viewing and consistently feature violent programs in the evening.

It is individual programs, rather than networks per se that provide the most violent content, and the need is for parents to censor specific shows rather than entire channels. One does not forego all movies from a single production house because one of them is excessively violent.

...Related to this recommendation, the FCC report concludes that the existing age/content program rating system established voluntarily by the television industry has been of "limited effectiveness."

Dr. Greenberg: The age-based and content-based ratings are inconsistent from one network to another, and from one production house to another, because each has devised its own definitions and used its own set of raters. In addition, NBC has never provided content ratings. What is needed is a single set of definitions for TV show ratings, as we have for movie ratings. And we need a single body to apply those definitions, instead of each network doing its own thing. Because of the inconsistencies in the present system, parents find the ratings confusing and unreliable.

... The most controversial item in the report is the FCC's belief that "Congress should develop an appropriate definition of excessively violent programming," as an initial step toward potentially mandating reduction of such content.

Dr. Greenberg: Congress requested the FCC to develop a definition of excessive violence. The FCC has reneged and handed it back to Congress. A workable and appropriate definition would better be developed by social scientists working initially with television industry researchers to develop a process for creating an operational definition. It is likely to be a complex measure that includes such elements as the graphic nature of the violence, whether it is gratuitous or not, its justification, etc. I believe it is doable; whether it will stand the constitutional test is for others to determine.

Dr. Greenberg can be reached for further commentary at the Quello Center, +1.517.432.8001.