n 1993, U.S. network programs offered about three violent acts per hour during prime time, and eighteen per hour during children’s Saturday morning programs. During the last twenty years the average child has viewed some 8,000 TV murders and 100,000 other acts of violence before finishing elementary school. If one includes cable programming and video rentals, the violence numbers escalate. (Popular rental films like Die Hard, with 264 deaths, are much more violent than major network programs.)

This is life as rendered by a rather peculiar storyteller, one who reflects the culture’s mythology but not its reality. In U.S. action-oriented crime shows (the shows most often exported to the world market), TV cops fire their guns in almost every episode; in Chicago, the average police officer fires a gun once every twenty-seven years.

Does viewing televised aggression influence some people to commit aggression? Was the
"All of us who make motion pictures are teachers, teachers with very loud voices."
—George Lucas
Academy Award ceremonies, 1992

judge who in 1993 tried two British ten-year-olds for their murder of a two-year-old right to suspect that one possible influence was their exposure to “violent video films”? To answer such questions, researchers have conducted correlational and experimental studies.

Correlational studies link young children’s viewing of violence and their combativeness as teenagers and young adults. In the United States and Canada, a doubling of homicide rates between 1967 and 1974 coincided with the introduction and spread of television. Moreover, census regions that acquired television late showed the homicide rate jump correspondingly later. Among white South Africans, who were first introduced to television in 1975, a similar near-doubling of the homicide rate did not begin until after 1975.

Critics respond that these correlational studies do not prove that viewing violence causes aggression. Maybe aggressive children prefer violent programs. Maybe children of neglectful or abusive parents are both more aggressive and more often left in front of the TV. Or maybe television simply reflects, rather than affects, violent trends.

To pin down causation, experimenters have randomly assigned some viewers to view violence and others to view entertaining nonviolence. Does viewing murder and mayhem make people react more cruelly when irritated?

“...The consensus among most of the research community,” reported the National Institute on Mental Health (1982), “is that violence on television does lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch the programs.”

“...There is absolutely no doubt,” concluded the 1983 American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth, “that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior.”

Medical, pediatric, and public health societies have voiced similar conclusions. The violence effect stems from a combination of factors—from arousal by the violent excitement, from the strengthening of violence-related ideas, from the erosion of one’s inhibitions, and from imitation.

Television’s unreal world, in which acts of aggression greatly outnumber acts of affection, can also affect our thinking about the real world. Those who avidly watch prime-time crime regard the world as more dangerous. Prolonged exposure to violence also desensitizes viewers; they become more indifferent to it when later viewing a brawl, whether on TV or in real life. Indeed, suggest Edward Donnerstein and his co-researchers, an evil psychologist could hardly imagine a better way to make people indifferent to brutality than to expose them to a graded series of scenes, from fights to killings to the mutilations of slasher movies.

How Canada Will Act

- **Standards:** The Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) has recently rewritten its voluntary code regulating violent content in dramas and music videos. It will be evaluated, enforced, and, if necessary, strengthened by the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, which regulates Canadian broadcasting.

- **International Cooperation:** Canada will work with the U.S. on a joint effort to curb violent programming.

- **Public Education:** A planned campaign includes public service announcements as well as a number of media-literacy initiatives through schools, churches, and community organizations.

- **Advertising:** Canada’s major advertisers will be encouraged not to place ads within violent television programs.

- **Awards:** The creation of the Virginie Lariviere Television Award will recognize those whose contributions help to make television less violent.

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