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ABSTRACT

A workshop was held to advise the Department of Health, Education and Welfare and the National Institute of Mental Health on the development of measures of television violence. This report summarizes the discussions of the workshop, covering the need for and use of a TV violence measure, the complexity and content of the measure, and processes for establishing a profile of TV violence. Also provided is a summary of recommendations: that a profile of televised violence rather than a simple index be developed; that the development of such a profile is feasible; that the profile should be seen as an instrument for public and industry education and as providing an information base for constructive influence; that the profile should be developed, maintained, and reported on outside both the TV industry and the government; that the profile should operate in a context in which alternative programing is encouraged; that the profile should draw on and incorporate ongoing research; and that, since there are currently several models for an appropriate institutional arrangement for planning and developing the profile, work should be started soon. (Several pages may be light.) (RH)

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National Institute of Mental Health
[Report of Special Consultation on
the Development of Measures of TV Violence]
Washington, D.C., June 2, 1972

Summary of Recommendations:

1. A profile of televised violence should be developed rather than a simple index or measure of its frequency or level. Such a profile would take account of the social relationships portrayed by the violence, the motivations of the characters involved, whether the violence is explained or not, whether its consequences are shown, the perceptions of the violence by target audiences, short and long-term effects of viewing violence, and the correlation of known viewing patterns of target audiences with readings on the above dimensions.

2. The development of such a profile is feasible. Research is still needed to solve problems of content and design, but the profile can, and should, evolve as the research is carried out and not wait for its total completion.

3. The profile should be seen as an instrument for public and industry education and as providing an information base for constructive influence to widen and improve programming. It should not be for regulation or program restriction.

4. The profile should be developed, maintained, and reported on outside of both the TV industry and the Federal Government. An adversary relationship with the industry should be avoided, as should any relationship implying a consultative role to the industry or certification or approval of industry practice. While the intellectual resources of Federally-supported research programs, and Federal support of research to develop the profile are essential and appropriate, regulation would be implied by, if not implicit in, locating planning and operation of the profile within the Federal Government. Whether the Federal Government should, or must, support planning, operation and reporting activities is open; opinions vary.

5. The profile should operate in a context in which alternative programming is encouraged and illustrated and there are rewards for broadening and improving the range of interests and behaviors portrayed, as well as negative sanctions for exceeding certain bounds.

6. The profile should draw on and incorporate ongoing research on the behavioral effects of viewing and provide insights for researchers; it should not be allowed to become a static measuring device.

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7. There are several models for an appropriate institutional arrangement for planning and development of the profile outside of government and industry that are available for the consideration of planners and social scientists; this should make it possible to begin work soon so that the momentum created by the work of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee and Congressional hearings on its report will not be lost.

Background and Purpose of the Consultation. On May 31 - June 1, a workshop was held to advise the DHEW and NIMH on research to follow up on the report of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on TV and Social Behavior. On June 2, a special session was held to focus specifically on the development of measures of TV violence. A list of the participants in the June 2 session is appended.

The purpose of the June 2 special consultation was to provide advice to the DHEW and NIMH on the feasibility of establishing a violence index. This task was outlined by the Secretary, DHEW, in his letter of May 12, 1972, to Senator Magnuson, Chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, and Senator Pastore, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Communications. Participants had available the report of the Subcommittee's March 1972 hearings on the work and report of the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee which included discussion by several witnesses of the need for TV violence monitoring.

Participants were asked specifically to discuss the need for and uses of such a measure, its content, the theoretical, methodological, and practical problems involved in its development, and the most appropriate and useful relationships among the concerned parties, including: Federal research supporting agencies, the FCC, the Congress and its constituents, and the TV industry. It was expected that the day's meeting would be only the beginning of a series of discussions and planning sessions and that the principal focus was to be on the feasibility and the development of a useful and valid measure.

The Need for and Use of a TV Violence Measure. The discussion proceeded from an implicit recognition by all participants that the portrayal of excessive violence, however violence may be defined, in current television programming has potential harmful effects, particularly for children, and that action of some kind is called for. The question of the usefulness of a measure of violence per se was approached through discussion, summarized below, of the complexity of the concept of violence and the necessary characteristics and context of the measure.

The major user of such a measure was identified as the general public with the TV industry itself as a second almost equally important

user. Much of the discussion reinforced and elaborated on this point. Participants rejected any idea that an index should be developed for regulatory use; there was considerable concern that the mere existence of a measure (and if not its existence, the participation of Federal agencies in its development) might imply if not actually be a move toward regulation.

While monitoring for regulatory purposes was rejected, there was considerable discussion of the international, particularly the British, experience in which the pattern is one of less commercial television and much more control. One participant, a British social scientist who has studied British TV extensively and has followed international research, pointed out that other countries have specifically rejected the U.S. model. In Britain, regulation has brought its own set of problems although they are not necessarily more serious than those arising from lack of regulation. There is considerable pressure, within the framework of existing regulations, for higher standards and better balance. In general, public concern is less with potential harmful effects than with such issues as widening choice and raising standards.

Testimony before the Communications Subcommittee identified parental monitoring of children's viewing as an important use of a violence measure. The consultant group did not see this as a very real possibility for many families since relatively few parents monitor their children's TV, and children whose viewing is so restricted can see the forbidden programs elsewhere. It was pointed out that in contrast to other countries, a child in the United States has to exert a positive choice to avoid violent programming and the range of choice is often very restricted. It is also true for many adults and children that choice behavior is often not involved in determining what is viewed. The best predictor of what many viewers will watch in any given time period is the channel they had on just before.

Participants saw the violence measure as being primarily a means of "consumer education" and as providing an information base from which public pressure could be brought to bear on the media. Paradoxically, while certain superficial characteristics of the viewing public are carefully studied, primarily for advertising purposes, the public is otherwise largely ignored and is often vilified for its supposed low level of taste.

There are actually a number of publics with different concerns. These include: that public concerned with the harmful effects of degrading stereotypes; another concerned that only one, often overly simple and inappropriate, way of resolving human problems and conflicts is portrayed -- the physical overpowering of the other person or group; and still another concerned less with negative effects than that better use is not being made of a powerful instrument.

Discussion continually returned to the need to use the index to provide information to, and possibly guidelines for, the media. From past experience in both the psychological laboratory and in industry we know that socially responsible behavior is produced through performance evaluation. TV, itself, probably public TV, could be used as an effective way of presenting information from the index and alternative forms of programming. Such presentations of alternatives and their differential consequences can have salutary behavioral effects. In discussion of the importance of providing specific examples of new program content and its reception, it was pointed out that the artistic and economic limitations of the media must be kept in mind. Physical violence is the cheapest, quickest, and easiest way to portray conflict in a visual medium. In this part of the discussion, the point was again made that the development and use of an index be for widening rather than restricting programming and that an index should be used in a situation in which alternatives are systematically illustrated and their use rewarded.

Psychological and social behavioral insights developed through research are not being fully utilized in either the creation of programs or in decision making within television. A basic goal should be to dispel stereotypes of the audience held by those within the industry. There was discussion about those points within the industry at which information should be aimed or leverage sought. Starting with an initial assumption that it is in the production process that critical decisions about use of violent programming are made, the discussion turned to the role of sponsors, writers, network executives, local station owners and operators, those syndicating material, and cable operators. The question of just where within the industry such decisions are made is a very complicated one. At the research workshop preceding this special consultation, studies of the structure of the media were identified for priority research attention.

A major conclusion of the session was that if an index is to be useful in enlarging program choice, an adversary relationship between the industry and those developing the index must be avoided. There was some feeling that the time had come when the industry might welcome some general guidelines. The example of industrial environmental pollution was cited; when public pressure made some action inevitable, industry asked for guidelines so that competition might be equalized.

Complexity and Content of the Measure. Much of the day's discussion focused on the complexity of defining and measuring televised violence. Participants felt strongly that any endeavor not taking that complexity fully into account would be counterproductive. While the concept

of violence itself is complex, there are also questions of the social usefulness of some violence and whether or not there is a public taste for violence that must be satisfied.

On the last point, the question was raised as to how, if they are to reduce the incidence of violence, TV producers can satisfy the alleged public liking of violence. As evidence of that liking, the incorporation of violence in the arts throughout history was cited. Other participants felt that it was not violence per se that was liked or needed, but some other quality -- possibly conflict or suspense -- symbolized by violence. It was pointed out that so far as television viewing is concerned, what one likes is largely a function of what one has to choose from. There is some research evidence on "liking." A British study of children under 13 showed that violence rated neither lowest nor highest in liking, but somewhere in between and that humor was by far the most popular program characteristic. World-wide, the most popular program ever shown has been the Forsyte Saga. Apart from whether or not there is a liking for violence to be satisfied in one way or another, we should be concerned with showing violence as a part of life and ways of handling it.

There is a body of research information on the incidence of televised violence. A recent study of violence in all British TV output over the two channels, BBC and commercial, for a period of six months was outlined. The study showed no overall difference in amount of violence shown between the commercial channel and the BBC. Because the violence rate was calculated by program segments, and news and children's programs are typified by short segments, those two forms of programming had the highest violence rates. Programs imported from the United States were more violent than non-imports. Films and series were more violent than individual drama; in individual drama, violence was among characters who knew each other well, while in films and series it was among people who had no relationship apart from that leading to the violence.

In the United States, the research program on cultural indicators at the Annenberg School of Communication, (which currently has support for pilot work from NIMH), is exploring what message about social relationships is demonstrated by violence -- for example, who inflicts violence on whom with what results? As part of the cultural indicators project, a "violence index" is being developed and reported. This is an effort to derive and combine a few, admittedly oversimplified, measures of violent actions. "Violent actions" are defined as overt acts intended to inflict physical harm or to kill. The sample is one week's prime time network television. Ratings are made for prevalence, the proportion of violence per program and per time period; rate of violent acts per program and

per time period; the groups portrayed as inflicting or receiving violence; and the proportion of characters involved. The index is simply an additive measure with weighting on such dimensions as seriousness of the violent act.

The participants underlined hazards involved in any simple frequency count of violent acts. It is easy enough to manipulate level of violence while increasing its impact, for example by increasing the lead time for each violent act or by showing kinds of violence which are more disturbing. One participant had given up an earlier attempt at content analysis because of the problem of differential impact of varying acts of violence. For example, military training, on the one hand, has shown that even a simulation of a knife entering a human body has a very disturbing effect. But, on the other hand, increasing the number of killings in a program in which there has already been a number of them does not necessarily increase impact per act. Furthermore, showing the delegation of violence to others, rather than the violence itself, may decrease impact while demonstrating highly undesirable social attitudes.

In the opinion of many of the workshop participants, the next step is to somehow link studies of viewers' perceptions of violence and its effects with the kind of sophisticated analysis of program content being carried out under the Annenberg School's project. The nature of such a linkage, however, is an important and largely unresolved question. Even those participants who felt that an attempt should be made to combine measures of what is presented and of its effects were concerned that such a combination would imply a direct, linear, causal relationship between program content and behavior. Other participants felt that the many measures required should not be combined; that their separation would ensure that the complexity of the problem is never lost sight of.

While its detailed form and content could not be specified in such a brief consideration, all the participants agreed that the need was not for a single violence index or measure, but for a multidimensional "profile" which would characterize televised violence on as many dimensions as possible. Since violence is more than the portrayal of an emotion -- it is a demonstration of such social relationships as status and power -- those relationships must be taken into account. Other dimensions essential for inclusion are: the groups (or the groups to which individual characters belong) involved, the kinds of violence, the purpose of the violence, whether any explanation of it is given, its results, how different groups of viewers perceive the violence, and behavioral effects. The profile also should be correlated with known viewing habits of target audiences, especially children of different ages.

Some participants felt that such a multidimensional profile would be easier to explain and understand than a combined index with weightings. A multidimensional profile would also fit with an informative rather than a regulatory orientation. It was also felt that in addition to being multidimensional, the profile should be developed from different research approaches, because they recognized clearly that it is unlikely that researchers studying the behavioral effects of televised violence will also be interested in or able to develop the needed measures. These two kinds of work, however, should inform and enrich each other. Further, it is important that once the profile is developed, it not be allowed to become a static measuring device. Interaction between those responsible for it and other researchers would be the best insurance against that.

There are still other kinds of design problems. Whether or not monitoring on a national scale is desirable was questioned. The system in question is enormously complex. Stations, not channels, are licensed by the FCC, and many program choices are made at the station level. A good part of the material actually shown, especially on children's programs, is the product of past seasons now being syndicated. Cable television will not simply increase these problems, but change them to those of a different magnitude. If the request to monitor the level of violence entering American homes is taken literally, an extraordinarily complex and expensive measurement task is created. The Annenberg School cultural indicators project illustrates the difficulty of a relatively simple content analysis of one week's prime time network screening. Measuring what is actually watched, by whom, and with what effects, is a problem of an entirely different order.

Since questions about form and content of a violence profile are in themselves research questions, and could only be sketched in outline in so brief a session, participants turned to a discussion of the process by which a violence profile could be brought into existence.

Process for Establishing a Profile of TV Violence. Several models whereby a multidimensional, multiapproach profile could be developed were discussed. One participant mentioned that of the National Association of Broadcasters which has wide membership and a code of industry practice. This led to a discussion of the form cooperation with the media should take. Discussants felt strongly that those actually involved in developing and maintaining the profile must avoid a relationship that could be interpreted as consultative or as certifying review and approval of industry practice.

The model of the working committees of the Social Science Research Council was discussed with considerable interest. The Council represents professional social science organizations, has a staff of social scientists, and has a tradition of assembling working committees to open up new fields of inquiry.

The National Educational Assessment was a third model discussed. That enterprise, with special staff and funds for research, was brought into being after the widest possible consultation by a consortium of foundations and educational organizations, but with a commitment of very substantial support for its operations by the Office of Education.

Ideally, participants felt, a commission should be established with its own staff and research funds to develop the profile and report annually to the public. The participants were unanimous in their feeling that such a commission must be located outside of the Federal Government because of regulatory implications. There was some ambivalence about whether the commission should or could operate without Federal financial support. One participant felt that this was an appropriate opportunity for a completely private endeavor. Others felt that Federal funding would be essential. Another participant felt that even the present session would have best been convened by an extragovernmental organization.

Once research to establish the profile is accomplished, the location for its operation and responsibility for reporting on it will have to be considered. The intellectual problems attractive to social scientists will have been solved, yet it will be important to retain their involvement. The model of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University may be relevant; part-time work on Bureau contract projects is combined with staff work on their own research interests. Using such a model, work on a violence profile might be coupled with research on the effects of TV viewing and prove an attractive and mutually enriching combination.

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June 2 - Special Session on
Development of Measures of the Level of TV Violence

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