Childhood, Violence and Television:Television Use and Children's Perception of Violence on Television[1]

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■ *In this article we present the main results of a study commissioned by the Catalonia Broadcasting Council and prepared during 2001 by the Violence and Television Research Group at the Blanquerna School of Communication Studies (URL) on television usage and how children perceive violence on TV.*
(See www.audiovisualcat.net/recerca/ presentacio-violencia.html.)

The study started from the position that children are one of the age groups that watch the most TV. Audience surveys confirm that on average children spend more than three hours a day in front of the small screen and suggest that a significant part of the programmes they like the most are aimed at an adult audience and broadcast outside the children's viewing schedule. Some experts believe this should set the alarm bells ringing.

Television is one of the favourite targets of the apocalyptic discourses often present during times of insecurity that are wont to be filled with bad omens about the fate of humanity. *Common sense*, and often the intellectual field, is used to posit television as one of the scapegoats of our times. We are living in a time full of uncertainty. The anxiety and concern many people have with regard to today's society are projected onto television, which can end up being considered the source of all our problems.

Social sensitivity towards violence has also grown significantly in recent decades. This sensitivity is expressed at many levels and is manifested in society's preoccupation with the excess of scenes of violence presented on TV[2]. It is also expressed in the growing unease about the repercussions that violent images in films and on TV have on children, as they are considered to be a particularly vulnerable *risk group*. For example, some health reports have indicated the negative effects television supposedly has on children, including disturbed sleep (insomnia, nightmares and bad dreams); language delay (poverty of vocabulary and poor verbal fluidity); difficulties at school (learning problems); anxiety to satisfy advertising stimuli and increased aggression or apathy (lack of interest in the stimuli of daily life) (Muñoz; Pedrero, 1996). In these types of studies it is taken for granted that the social effects of television are always negative.

Most of the studies that look at violence and television focus on violent content and presuppose a direct causal relationship between violence on TV and violence in society, even though they often fail to explain the mechanisms through which this influence is activated. From a methodological point of view, they use content analyses, which are a necessary but not sufficient condition for understanding the social influence and repercussion of violence on TV.

We believe that specialised research has focussed too much on studying the effects of the media when today it should focus on studying how it is received. For many years, the question focused on what television does to children. We consider this approach to be erroneous, as it fails to throw light on the issue and is misguiding with regard to how to solve the problem. As we have said before, the question is not so much what television does to children but rather what use boys and girls make of it and what the programmes they watch mean to them.

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Most of the specialist research on violence and television has been done in the United States. In our work *La violència en la mirada* (2001) we suggested the need to promote research into television violence in the context of our own sociocultural environment. We said it should be a type of research that was not limited to studying either the television medium or "violent" programming content, but be sensitive to the prominence and responsibility of viewers in their use of television and perception of TV messages. That is why we believe it is necessary to take sensitivity and viewers' perceptions into account to redefine the notion of violence on TV and give it a meaning appropriate to current times, as it is a notion that has changed.

The concept of violence has also undergone changes over time. Norbert Elias (1987) said that the *process of civilisation* (which is neither lineal nor irreversible) allows human beings to take greater control and self-repression with regard to aggressive impulses in favour of a fairly scrupulous following of social rules and conventions. In virtue of this process, physical violence has been diminishing and has become intolerable in the eyes of Western citizens, but there are other, more subtle forms of violence that are almost invisible and which we accept or exercise either without realising it or with our tacit approval. In the theoretical research[3] that preceded this applied research work, we found the existence of different types of human violence and proposed a definition of violence that was more suitable to our cultural context. As a research group we were interested in defining types of violence, observing the level of formalisation that this violence presents in the television narrative and the intensity that young viewers attribute to it.

Finally, we wanted to locate our work within the context of communication research at the international level. Broadly speaking, and greatly simplifying the issue, we consider there are two main theoretical approaches, one of a positivist nature and the other of a hermeneutic/comprehensive nature, which guide modern scientific research in this area:

1. Positivist Paradigm. The first approach, defended by authors such as Bandura & Walters (1963), Berkowitz (1996) and Friedrich & Huston (1986), draws on behavioural psychology to sustain that television is a transmitter of violent behaviour that favours the modelled and conditioned learning of aggressive trends. This school of thought holds that watching TV is an important risk factor that ends up becoming the basic ingredient of the *causal effect* theory between seeing violence on TV and aggressive behaviour.

2. Hermeneutic/Comprehensive Paradigm. The second point of view, defended by many authors from different spheres of the social sciences, takes a more interdisciplinary approach and aims to explain the content involved in programming in a comprehensive and integrationary manner and taking into account the importance of factors of a psychic, social or cultural nature. From this point of view, which is the one we feel the most affinity with, the idea is that one of the important roles of television is its ability to promote stereotypes and social values that are not always in line with the ideals of a society based on dialogue and peace. By this way of thinking, the responsible authorities should take more care about ensuring quality programming and particularly the regulation of television content in order to increase the presence of positive models and altruistic values.

The research situation in our country is quite similar to the international one, although here very few research works exist (in fact, it is a new tradition that has yet to bear important fruit). The most common ones are studies into effects (mainly using methodologies of a quantitative type) that aim to determine the level of influence of television violence on children (see García Galera, 2001). A look at the different studies shows that the preconceived belief that television generates violence can distort the research work and condition the results beforehand.

Given this situation, we wanted to emphasise the qualitative side of research into the social use that children make of television. The application of qualitative studies was very useful because it allowed us to obtain figures that were more adjusted and precise about children's social and family relations.

The results of the work can contribute to a better understanding of the problem and could be used to give media owners and journalists more tools of comprehension and elements of judgement to be able to take a position that is strongly grounded on the presence of violence in different television stations (public and private), particularly during scheduling times addressed at children and adolescents.

1. The Study of Violence and Television

Specialised research has generally had a very poor conception about the human condition (Thompson, 1998). The public has been considered to be vulnerable and defenceless and this perception has been further accentuated with regard to children. Researchers have been preoccupied with finding proof or evidence that confirms that television is damaging and that violent images on TV have a perverse effect on children.

We would like to propose a type of research that is not circumscribed to studying the television medium or the "violent content" of programming but is sensitive to the prominence and responsibility of viewers in the use of television and their reception of television messages. We believe it is necessary to redirect specialist research and propose moving from "a content analysis to a reception analysis". To that end it is necessary, bearing viewers' sensitivity and perception in mind, to redefine the notion of violence on TV to give it a meaning that is suitable to current times. From these premises we can see children as valid interlocutors and protagonists in the construction of meanings.

1.1 Conceptual Approximations Towards *Childhood*

In many proposals, the concept of childhood implies offering children audiovisual matter that responds to a fairly simplistic and stereotyped notion of childhood. Children are seen as passive and ignorant beings and hence very easily influenced by the media. There is a distrustful and skittish view towards childhood that is not exclusive to the media but also responds to a longstanding perception in our society about children and human beings. This concept of childhood is the result of a long historical process that features an idea of children as being passive and pre-intelligent (i.e., practically unfinished beings).

Today an alternative concept in which children are considered co-builders of their own learning is proposed. As the Italian pedagogue Malaguzzi, well known internationally for his educational proposals in the region of Emilia Romana, says, "Our choice is a child who at birth already has a desire to feel part of the world, which makes him or her actively participate in a network of ability and learning, be capable of organising relations and maps of personal, social/interpersonal, cognitive, affective and even symbolic orientation" (Malaguzzi, 1996).

We therefore consider children to be active beings, protagonists of their processes of personal autonomy when it comes to thinking and doing things, and full of personal abilities and communicational capacities. Beginning from this supposition, we believe it is important to consider children as interlocutors in the research we are dealing with, where we attempt to discover their perceptions towards violence and television.

1.2 Children's Stories and Violence

It is important to emphasise children's stories as a historical reference that predates television. In earlier times, these stories were the object of adult concern about the fear caused by the information that the world's children received (Pastoriza, 1962).

At the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution led to a series of changes in the social construction of the rights of adults and also the rights of children (Aries, 1987). This created an awareness of the need to care for and protect children, increased adult sensitivity towards them and, particularly within the privileged classes, promoted the assumption of Rousseauian ideas of the innocent child: "The child must be a child before he becomes a man, as he has his own ways of being, thinking and feeling" (Rousseau, 1969).

As Dahlberg, Moss & Pence (1999: 91) say, the idea of childhood that arises from Rousseau's concept of the child is understood as a period of innocence in a person's life. It is believed that boys and girls have enough ability to investigate Virtue, Truth and Beauty when they are located in a society that rots the innate goodness with which they are born. The authors say that this image of the child generates in adults a desire to protect children from the corrupt world that surrounds them, which is violent, oppressive, marketed and exploited, by building a type of environment in which the child is offered protection, continuity and security.

There are various currents within psychology and pedagogy that do not believe in the suitability of making the presence of violence explicit in literary works aimed at children. We should not forget that many children's stories and tales, such as Little Red Riding Hood, are extraor-

dinarily *violent* in every known version. It is logical for adults to be concerned about the *violent content* of these children's stories and for them to want to defend children from a series of *negative* elements and values present in our society. However, it is a question of measures. Certain restrictions can be established, but we should make sure that we do not become, as Brenda Bellorín[4] says, literary or cultural censors.

We live in a media society and culture. The presence of the broadcast media makes the illusionary existence of this children's world of fantasies, entertainment and innocence more difficult to separate from the adult world (Postman, 1990). This is one but not the only reason why childhood tends to be shortened in today's world and leads many parents and teachers to consider television as a danger and threat for children, as they find it hard to exercise effective control over this device that has invaded the domestic space. Television is a window, situated in the heart of the home, which puts us in contact with different realities (some of which are considered unsuitable for children).

As Salvador Cardús says, "If I really wanted to protect my child, I should ensure that he has more, not less, access to this new cultural and technological world" (Cardús, 1998: 27). We believe that the question is not about removing children from fear or from disturbing social situations, but rather limiting the consumption of these stories, teaching boys and girls a series of reading skills and developing their defences. Bellorín says it would be a mistake to deprive children of the ability to approach the adult world through reading. She extends her argument to include television consumption and access to the world of the Internet.

2. Methodological Orientations

Most of the specialist research has questioned the impact that violent images or scenes in fictional spaces have on the public to which they are exposed. They consider that children are a particularly sensitive and vulnerable public. This type of research responds to a social and political concern and unrest: what impact does television (i.e., violent images on television) have on children? Our research wanted to turn the issue around and change the meaning of the questions.

1. What use do children make of television?
2. How do they read images of violence?

The study of violence on TV is a complex and difficult issue that requires a more sophisticated methodological strategy than the one on which most studies into content have been based. To that end, the research methodology we employed combined quantitative and qualitative tools that enabled a description and analysis of the social uses of television in the family sphere and made it possible to look in more detail at knowledge about how children perceive violence on TV (Hartley, 2000).

The initial proposal was to describe the habits, television uses and forms of consumption of TV programmes and assess considerations about violence by boys and girls from different economic and social spheres in the city of Barcelona. Secondly, and as the main goal, we wanted to establish a qualitative approximation towards the perception that children and preadolescents have of the different types of violence present in television fiction.

We chose five public primary schools located in different parts of Barcelona and selected students aged 7 to 12. In the quantitative approximation we used a questionnaire to interview 443 children. The fieldwork was carried out from 12-19 March 2001.

The exploratory nature of the study and particularly the characteristics of the interviewees (children and preadolescents) made it advisable to prepare a very short questionnaire with closed questions drawn up in a very clear and comprehensible manner. *Closed questions* limit individual freedom and make it impossible to look too profoundly into details, but have the advantage that they allow a simple answer and facilitate subsequent use of the data.

Bearing in mind that the nature of this work made it advisable to take an eminently qualitative approach, in a second phase we established focus groups made up of eight groups with a total participation of 48 students. The fieldwork was carried out intensively from 19-23 March. Two groups were used at each school and each group comprised six children (three boys and three girls).

The aim of the focus groups was to establish a relaxed and comfortable discussion for the participants to put forward their ideas and comments. The open nature of the discussion allowed the research group to leave the pre-

established script and explore unexpected deviations not possible in more rigid situations. Moreover, the analysis of the data provided by the focus groups was very complex. The comments had to be analysed within the context of the group and we had to be extremely careful not to extrapolate the results gathered in the focus groups when analysing the situation of the population in general.

The focus groups were shown four scenes from different series aimed at a young audience: *Doraemon*, *Cow and Chicken*, *Rin Tin Tin* and *Wolf and Sheep*[5]. Various types of violence could be identified within the sequences shown.

For the analysis part of the focus group, a number of analysis categories were established that focussed on the observation of three aspects we have already mentioned: the type of violence, the formalisation of the violence and its level of intensity and seriousness. The three categories influenced each other and allowed us to establish a number of criteria for choosing four sequences of TV programmes so that the children could watch them and later discuss them in the focus group.

Finally, it is important to add that beginning from the interaction with the boys and girls in the discussion group, other basic categories arose which were also taken into account in the study:

- Distinction between reality and fiction
- Aesthetic and formal parameters
- Manifestations of pleasure and displeasure
- Ethical considerations

3. Results

3.1 Quantitative Study Data

Once the fieldwork had been done and the data from the questionnaires obtained, we could make a summary of the main results obtained:

1. The general data showed that 82% of the boys and girls interviewed lived with their parents, i.e., they were part of a nuclear family. It is important to interpret the use of television within the domestic context bearing in mind the family structure and type of relationships among the members of the family.

2. All the homes of the children and preadolescents interviewed had a television set. 72% of the children had more than one set at home. Television therefore had a notable presence in the domestic geography and occupied an important place in the family living room.

3. There was a positive correlation between the number of TV sets and the number of hours that children spent in front of the small screen. In other words, the more sets in the home the more time they spent *contemplating* TV.

4. Television played an important part in children's time. 83% of the boys and girls interviewed had the subjective perception that they watch *quite a lot* or *a lot* of television. Only 17% believed they watched little TV.

5. The times when they watched the most television was before and immediately after school. For example, the scheduling times that recorded the highest television consumption levels were the *late afternoon* (6-8 p.m.) and the *evening*, i.e., at dinnertime and after dinner.

6. The children felt they had a relatively important control over remote controls, which allowed them to flick between programmes. 47.4% of the total said they *had some say* in the decision of the programmes to watch while 30.1% said they were the *only ones* who chose the programmes.

7. The boys and girls interviewed admitted they did other things at the same time as they watched TV. Watching TV was nearly always (81.6% of the people interviewed) accompanied by other activities, such as *eating*, *playing* or *doing homework*, in this order.

8. Two out of every three children interviewed said they did not feel "monitored" while they watched TV. On the other hand, 45% of the children (particularly the younger ones) said they liked to have company while they watched television.

9. The most popular children's programme amongst the children interviewed was *Pokemon*, which was watched by 19.4% of the sample. 20.3% of the children liked this programme. It was particularly popular with boys and girls aged 7-10, and especially with 8-9 year-olds. It was not very popular among children aged 11-12. Most of the children's programmes were watched by barely 5% of the boys and girls. The three programmes not exclusively designed for children that were the most popular were *The Simpsons* (watched by 23.2% of respondents), *Veterinaris* (17.8%) and *Pasa Palabra* (12.4%).

10. Censorship exercised by adults with respect to programming was not very important and was very

heterogeneous, as it differed according to the range of the television offer and the plurality of the preferences as expressed by the children.

3.2 Results of the Qualitative Study

Finally, we would like to present the results of the qualitative part of the study, which was the central focus of the research work.

Television Culture

The children who participated in the focus groups generally had a good idea of television culture. This is not the place for making value judgements on whether that is good or bad. We only wish to point out that they had an exhaustive knowledge of television programming, which presented a very broad and diverse offer and which was very different to the television culture of their parents. The children were very knowledgeable about genre conventions and had a noticeable authority over the codes for interpreting television programmes.

Distinction Between Reality and Fiction

The interviewees, aged 7-12, were patently able to clearly distinguish between what is real and what is fiction. There is often the suspicion that children use television elements as an escape mechanism from daily life. However, in this study we found that the children were quite easily able to make the leap from one sphere of significance to another. In general, the imitation that children use in games was not of concern. The only concern was about the possibility of imitation of particular scatological or non-recreational behaviour that appeared on screen. They can sometimes be led by their imagination or fantasy, but that does not mean they are unaware that daily reality is the main reality. One curious fact was that the children of all ages projected the concern about imitating particular behaviours shown on television onto younger children, but did not feel affected themselves.

Age Differences

Children aged 7 or 8 develop prelogical thought in their construction of reality and easily connect with particular stories or characters in the fictional world. At this age they often interpret situations of physical violence as if they were a type of game.

By the time they are 11 or 12, the boys and girls could express themselves very well through verbal discourse. They had logical thought patterns and were able to take a more distant and critical view with regard to particular forms of violence. Following a discussion of the data obtained there were a number of observations that struck us as particularly relevant:

Recognition of Violence and Perception of Intensity

The children considered that physical violence was the main type of violence. This does not mean they were unaware of particular types of verbal or symbolic violence. There was also a notable ability to establish a gradation of violence beyond the most direct and graphical types such as physical violence. The 11 and 12 year-olds in particular were able to understand a verbal attack as a form of humiliation and ridicule. Normally, the violence present in news programmes and documentaries was seen as a more intensive (and hence more serious) reality than the violence that appeared in fictional programmes.

Ethical Considerations

Amongst the group of 11 and 12 year olds, there was in general a reflective and personal consideration that was particularly critical about stereotyped or simplified content in audiovisual programming. The older children thus expressed a demand for more developed and accurate storyline content, even though they were able to enjoy the recreational aspect of cartoons. Ethical considerations were not part of the spontaneous discourse of the younger children. However, they did verbally indicate a familiarity with the scenes chosen and commented on whether or not they liked them. They made comments while they watched them about aspects closely related to the knowledge they had about the viewed material (i.e., whether they had seen it before, explanations of other episodes, etc.).

4. Conclusions

Together with the rest of the media, television has an undeniable social and cultural importance. However, we believe that in general (and in specialised research) there is a tendency to give it too much importance, both positive

(when television is considered to be an educational instrument) and negative (when it is blamed as a bad influence). The supposed omnipresence and omnipotence of TV can lead us to forget and underappreciate the importance of other social and cultural authorities (e.g., the school or family) which continue to have a considerable weight on and great social responsibility in children's education.

Where does the fear and fascination about television come from? What is behind the concern about violence in today's world? Why is there such enormous concern about children? It is not easy to answer these questions and this may not be the place to try. We only want to show the existence of a situation of fear and anxiety that affects broad sectors of the population with regard to the issue of children, violence and TV.

In his work entitled Homo vidents (1998), Giovani Sartori highlights the danger that he says television involves in a world dominated by the culture of the image. We do no think it is right to make television (as an object or artefact) a subject or protagonist. It is people who are, or who should be, the real protagonists of social life.

We are aware of the importance and responsibility of communication professionals. However, we do not want to fall into a media-centric conception that tends to systematically locate the media in general and television in particular in the middle or heart of social life and give it a negative role. Many television analysts are unable to locate television in a determined social context. This leads to a tendency to ignore television or to place it in the middle of the discourse.

We have to change the traditional view about the social effects of television and uphold one that is more focussed on its social uses and the prominence of viewers, including children, in the interpretation of messages. This change involves a new approach with regard to the methodological strategies used in the research field. In this framework, we would stress that it is important to take into account the personal disposition of viewers and the social and family context in which they watch TV. It is necessary to maintain distance with regard to television as an object of study and to prevent projecting our fears and anxieties about this controversial issue. It is important to uphold, as Bourdieu says, an incessant attitude of epistemological vigilance.

Notes

1. This article is a new, reviewed and extended version of the following article, originally published in English: ARAN, S.; BARATA, F.; BUSQUET, J.; MEDINA, P. MORÓN, S.: (2003), "Childhood, Violence and Television: Television Use and Childhood Perception of Violence on Television". *Violence and Media: Resources and Discourses*. Barcelona: Trípodos [Extra, 2003], pp.109-121.

2. A CAC study published in 1998 found that the period between 5 and 7 p.m. had highest the concentration of violence: "The Representation of Violence on Television: A Quantitative Approximation to Fictional Programming Broadcast in Catalonia During One Week (2-8 June 1998)". Barcelona: CAC, 1998

3. ARAN, S; BARATA, F; BUSQUET, J; MEDINA, P: *La violència en la mirada. L'anàlisi de la violència a la televisió.* Barcelona: Study Papers, 2001.

4. "Our latent morality leads us to move heaven and earth to perpetuate what we understand as childhood. I believe we should pause a moment to think whether, with our overprotective attitude, we are really looking out for [children] or whether, on the contrary, we are leading them into defencelessness with regard to the adult world. […] This punitive, prudish and censorial list that political correctness proposes limits access to books under the premise that reading good things makes us good and reading bad or incorrect things makes us bad or incorrect individuals. As much as I would like to believe in the power of books, as much as I idealise literature, I can't help finding these premises somewhat superfluous and lacking in any good grounding". BELLORÍN, B. "If Little Red Riding Hood Had Read Politically Incorrect Stories, Would She Be In the Wolf's Tummy Today?" (Y ¿si Caperucita Roja hubiese leído cuentos políticamente incorrectos, el lobo la tendría hoy en la panza?).

5. With regard to the selection of images, they were all taken from an initial sample provided by the technical teams at the CAC, which monitored children's programmes broadcast in Catalonia from 10-18 March 2000. The channels that formed part of the sample were Canal 33, La 2, Tele-5, Antena 3 TV and Canal Plus.

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