



THE KILLING SCREEN

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Abstract: *In recent years the question of impact of violence in the media on children has acquired an extremely serious edge. The reason for this is the sudden appearance of multiple modes of transmission: television, cable TV, video and the Internet. Violent and aggressive material is now easily and abundantly available in the market and the world our children are growing up in is changing faster than they are growing up. Nowhere is this more evident than in the field of communication. The advances in technology the convergence of technologies and the sudden boom in the electronic media have changed our lives drastically.*

With the growth of the electronic media in India, a child's exposure to television and violence on television has increased phenomenally with a negative effect on children. The present paper is an attempt to understand the gravity of the killing screen on children.

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INTRODUCTION

There cannot be two opinions regarding the influence of screen on the behaviour of children. There is no doubt that television is an effective teaching instrument. Attractive "personality actors" make superior teachers and with good technology and production techniques, television can change people's behaviour (Skornia, 1977), And. there is no doubt that Americans are extensively exposed to its effects, for in the average household the television is turned on for about seven hours every day (Messner 1986). By the time the average American is 18 years old, he/she has watched about 18,000 murders.

Violence on the small screen, a hotly debated issue in the western world, has been demanding the attention of many a. reputed political figure. However, in India it is still not a matter that would ruffle too many feathers. Merely a decade old, satellite TV itself is a recent phenomenon in India. Cable TV has made television viewing a prime leisure activity in which an average adult spends an average of two to three hours daily in front of the TV set. More and more parents are adopting television as a convenient baby sitter (Padgaonkar, 1999).

Now-a-days TV watching begins as a favorite activity of most kids right from their second or third year onwards. Studies show that each year most kids spend an average of about 1000 hours in school and nearly 1500 hours in front of the television.

An increase in viewing time and the number of channels have changed the content of programmes. Social redemption and societal reconstruction no longer form the main themes of the serials and soaps. Action, mystery, chills and thrills are fast becoming the money-making mantra and there has been a steady increase in the amount of violence depicted on the Indian small screens (see figure 1)



Fig. 1 The Killing Screen



Though, certain isolated protests have been by teachers in Kolkata and certain southern States on the issue, but many seems to take no note of this darker, violent manifestation of our entertaining deity. Heavy use of electronic media can have significant negative effects on children's behavior, health and school performance. Those who watch a lot of simulated violence, common in many popular video games, can become immune to it, more inclined to act violently themselves and less likely to behave empathetically.

Report of the National Committee: Dramatically illustrated by the case of Ronnie Zamora, the question of the effects of children's television programming on children's behaviour first surfaced back in the 1960s. By 1969 televised violence had become a public issue, and the Surgeon General of the United States launched a two million study to determine the relationship between television and violence. After funding 23 research projects, in 1972 the Committee concluded:

- 1) Young children may imitate television violence.
- 2) Television violence may incite violence in children already predisposed to aggression.
- 3) Television violence may promote insensitivity of casualness about real-life suffering.

But, the Committee concluded that this all depends on individual children, for television violence shows no uniform adverse effects.

Ten years and 2500 studies later in 1982 the National Institute of Mental Health updated the Committee's report. This time the conclusion was that more recent research demonstrated "a causal relationship between viewing televised violence and aggressive behavior."

A surprise finding: Then came a surprising finding. Steven F. Messner, a sociologist was not satisfied with knowing that televised violence can influence mild forms of aggression, such as children hitting one another. He wanted to know if it has any effect on criminal violence. He was intrigued by the strong indications that it does. For example the number of people committing suicide increases after publicity is given to suicide (Phillips 1982). Similarly, the number of murders increased three ways after a championship prize fight - and more murders follow fights that are discussed on network evening news than fights that do not receive this publicity (Phillips, 1983).

Consequently, Mesner (1986) decided to test the hypothesis that communities exposed to high levels of televised violence will have high rates of violent crime. He was able to use



measures already available - the amount of violence on different programmes and the amount of criminal violence in a community. Knowing that violence is related to income, education and race, he made certain that these variables could not influence the findings. He was surprised by the findings: communities where more people watch the most violent programs have lower rates of murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault.

How can we interpret such a surprising findings? Messner suggests that the key is that watching television is a home based activity. This has two effects on criminal violence. First, young people who stay home are not running the streets and this reduces the likelihood of their committing violent acts. He says, "The clear implication of this argument is that television viewing by keeping youths at home, decreases opportunities for socialization into criminal sub-cultures, and in doing so reduces the likelihood of criminal behaviour. (1986: 230). Secondly, he says that since the home is safer than the streets the more that people stay at home (watching television or anything else), the less likely they are to become victims of a violent crime. A third possibility goes back to a standard interpretation of the extreme violence of Greek drama - the viewers receive catharsis, an arousal and cleansing (or relief) of emotions. But we now have indications that viewing television violence actually decreases rape and murder.

A study conducted by the Centre for Advocacy and Research for UNESCO's publication. The killing screen documented the extent of violence shown on television. The researcher studied programmes across five channels (DD1, DD2, Zee, Sony and Star Plus) for a period of nine days monitoring 56 hours 20 minutes of soaps, horrors as suspense drama as, current affairs programmes and a documentary.

In all the study counted as many as 759 distinct acts of violence during the specified period. Of these, the most common were extreme acts like threatening, slapping, screaming, shooting, assaulting, expletives, pushing, clobbering, stabbing, mental torture, eerie soundtracks, threatening music and the like. Highly popular 'family drama serials' and child specific programmes were found to be no less violent and scenes of violence and physical pain were often unduly prolonged. Even in 'mythological serials' parents complained of scenes depicting atrocities of the wicked being hourly stretched and at times in bad taste. Nearly 17 acts of violence were noted in a single episode of the child-specific programme, Shaktiman. This figure compares pretty unfavorably to the internationally accepted



standards of five to six violent acts in a half hour episode. In certain serials, figures go even as high as 22 to 24 acts of violence per half hour, portraying even such extreme acts like bombing, torturing, torture and burning.

Repeated use of eerie sound tracks, occasional hallucinations, nightmares and paranoia were also the tools used by many producers to build an atmosphere of fear. Violent psychopathic behaviour was found to account for 26 to 50 % of on screen violence on a given day in a specific channel. Docu-dramas and reconstructions of real life crimes, with the supposed motive of catching criminals and preventing crimes, too contributed largely to on screen violence.

Left untouched by the study was the role of violent promos and movies on television. Several promos on popular music channels feature acts of gross violence. The popular MTV in one of its ads features a man beheading chickens. The chicken in turn beheads the man and carries the head into the logo. The ETC music channels advertisement for its music cassette features no less than half a dozen murders. There is at least one extremely violent movie on the TV each day, especially in the English language movie channels.

Even cartoons, which are generally believed to be safe for children and which parents let their children watch unhindered, too have their share of violence. A study conducted by National Cable Television Association of America and supported by American Academy of Pediatrics detailing the adverse effect of screen violence on children concluded that a typical pre-scholar, who watches cartoons for an average of two hours daily, is exposed to 10,000 violent incidents per year. Of these, the study suggests, at least 500 pose a high risk of modeling aggressive attitudes and violence.

Watching lots of violence on TV and playing violent video games not only makes kids more physically aggressive. It makes them meaner and more distrustful which is evident from the researches.

The findings add a troubling new discussion to an exciting body of research linking violence in the media with overtly violent behaviour in children and adults, said David Walsh, co-author of the new study and head of the National Institute on Media and the Family.

The report found a correlation between kids' exposure to high levels of TV and video-game violence and what researchers called "relational aggression" - behaviour that includes name-calling, threats and rumour mongering. In addition, these same children were more likely



to view others with the greatest amount of suspicion, the study said, “long before kids throw a punch or pick up a weapon? They’re probably treating kids in a relationally aggressive way”, Walsh told Reuters in a telephone interview, “This is the kind of thing that becomes the breeding ground for more overtly violent behaviour as these kids get older.” The six-month study was based on evaluation of 219 Minnesota children in the third, fourth and fifth grades, taken from a combination of Public and private schools in urban, sub-urban and rural areas, Walsh said.

The youngsters filled out surveys of their TV viewing and video game habits, and were evaluated by their own teachers and peers in terms of how well they get along with others. They also took a standardized test used to rate individuals' level of trust and suspicion of others. Children rated the most ill-behaved, reported more exposure to overall media, violence and a greater preference for violence than other youngsters.

They also played more video games and tended to favour more violence in those games, the study found. These trends increased with the age of the children, the study found. “They become desensitized and watch more” Walsh said, “Concerns about a growing use of ‘incivility’ in society may be starting with our children”. Studies indicate that children on an average watch three to four hours of TV every day with holiday - time television viewing going up even to seven to eight hours per day. In many nuclear families, especially in homes where both the parents have constricted work schedules, the parents themselves encourage television viewing habits. TV in such homes takes on the role of ‘foster parent’ as inculcating other habits like reading, playing, drawing, painting demands time and effort on part of the parents. Watching television is considered to be the easiest and safest past time for the child to indulge in.

However it is important for the parents to realize that television viewing is not all that safe and innocent, as we would like to believe. Real life crimes by teenagers modeled on what they watch on the television is a cold fact that jolts us out of our smugness every now and then children walking up sweating and screaming in the middle of the night as an aftermath of a horror movie or serial is also a common occurrence with which many others are familiar as is the incidents of our young ones walking home injured after a WWF style wrestling match. Social-psychologists and researchers point out that viewing too much of violence on television has a definite negative impact on the psyche of our young ones. Viewers tend to



learn aggressive attitudes and behaviour from watching violence as Archana Parmar, mother of four yearold Sameer, learnt for herself. There was a sudden increase in my child's vocabulary of expletives going on from stupid, idiot to ku * *** ka ****, recalls Archana, Talks with the school teacher regarding the cause of the same yielded no result till one day she accidentally happened to be in the same room as her son, watching cartoons and commercials. It was then that she realized that these were the words being used by various cartoon character in the Hindi translation of the Show. Kiran, mother of another two and half year old narrates how her child's expression transforms completely as she watches a movie like terminator or Matrix. "She actually delights in the gun and fist fights which these movies feature and her behavior till at least half an hour after the show tends to be violent as she goes about brandishing her toy gun at all the sundry". She states, the children can become desensitized to the seriousness of violence. Studies suggest that TV violence that is glamoured i.e. perpetuated by an attractive role model, trivialized i.e., included humour or sanitized i.e., eradicated pain clues taught to the viewers that violence is a solution. Studies also suggest that too much cartoon violence might give the pre-schoolers who have difficulty indistinguishing the fantasy from reality the lesson that violence is desirable, necessary and painless."

Young viewers watching too much violence might develop too much violence might develop an unhealthy world view, learning that the world is actually a mean place, devoid of all beauty and goodness. Such a view would prevent them, from forming healthy, happy association as they would constantly be frightened of becoming victims of real life violence. Keeping all these factors in mind it is important that the elders in the family take on the TV viewing habits. Researchers suggest that the first step—healthy TV habits are restricting the TV watching hours to a maximum of 2 hours. About these two hours also the parents should be well aware of what their child is watching.

Taking out time to watch TV together is also not a bad idea as it gives the adults an opportunity to present all that the child is watching in correct perspective. The adult can perhaps explain to the young ones how the violence featured on the screens belongs to the world of fantasy and make believe and similar kind of acts of perpetuated in real life could cause untold suffering and misery. Probably, if parents had taken time to provide such explanation to their children, the unfortunate episodes of children losing their lives and



limbs in attempts to emulate Shaktiman or episodes from Rarnayana or Mahabharata could have been avoided.

Also important is to keep TV out of the bedroom of children as well as keep the mealtime free of this intruder. Parents should gently guide their children towards more positive and socially useful programmes and encourage watching of channels like Animal Planet, Discovery Kids and the like. Tele-viewing habits should be balanced by other indoor and outdoor activities like reading, swimming, athletics and the like. Parents should encourage the children to talk and express their views about what they see on the screen. Their attitudes and ideas should be given a patient, serious hearing to ensure that what our children watch is what is good for them.

CONCLUSION:

Much of the responsibility in relation to children and television rests with parents or adults in homes with children. Such policies should be adopted that are consistent with the principles of non-discrimination and the best interest of all children; raise awareness and mobilize all sectors of society to ensure the survival, development and participation of all children; address all forms of economic, commercial and sexual exploitation and abuse of children in the region and ensure that such efforts do not violate their rights, particularly their right to privacy; protect children from material which glorifies violence, sex, horror and conflict; and, promote positive values and not perpetuate discrimination and stereotypes.

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