

Research on TV violence and sex in SABC programmes
(Paper by Dr D.P Conradie (Human Science Research Council), to be
presented at the SABC Board & Management Workshop on the 12th of
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This paper summarizes research results dealing with (a) the level of violence and sex on SABC TV programmes, (b) qualitative perceptions of viewers regarding these types of TV content, (c) a few perspectives on how violent or sexual TV content can influence viewers, (d) some specific research findings, and (e) viewer reactions to control measures that broadcasters can use to deal with such content.

1 How much violence and sex is there on SABC TV?

Recent quantitative analyses of prime time (18:00-22:00) TV broadcasts show that SABC violence levels per hour are, on average, slightly higher than the violence level in US broadcasts (about 5.0 violent incidents per hour). Further qualitative analyses have revealed relatively low intensity levels of violence, sexual behaviour and nudity in SABC programmes:

SABC1: 5.0/7.5 violent incidents per hour ('98/'99)
85 % of prime time programmes have no violence
91 % of prime time programmes have no sex
90 % of prime time programmes have no nudity

SABC2: 3.7/7.6 violent incidents per hour ('98/'99)
70 % of prime time programmes have no violence
89 % of prime time programmes have no sex
91 % of prime time programmes have no nudity

SABC3: 6.3/6.4 violent incidents per hour ('98/'99)
65 % of prime time programmes have no violence
84 % of prime time programmes have no sex
87 % of prime time programmes have no nudity

2 How is TV violence and sex perceived by SABC viewers?

Qualitative interviews were conducted with 8 groups of viewers (parents and teenagers of 4 different language groups) on the level of violence and sex in programmes, yielded the following ratings:

Violence on SABC1: "Too much" (Nguni & Sotho parents and teenagers)

Violence on SABC2: "Acceptable" (Most groups of parents), and
"Too little" (Nguni & Sotho teenagers)

Violence on SABC3: "Too little" (Most groups of teenagers)
"Too much" (English & Afrikaans parents)

Sex on SABC1: "Too little" (Nguni parents and teenagers)
"Too much" (Sotho parents and teenagers)
"Unsure" (Most Afrikaans and English groups)

Sex on SABC2: "Unsure" (Most groups)

Sex on SABC3: Unclear ("Too little" x 3; "Unsure" x 2, "Too much" x2)

Undesirable content on SABC TV (as compared to other broadcasters):

"Less than on M-Net or e.tv" (4 groups, mostly teenagers)

"Same as on M-Net or e.tv" (3 groups).

"More than on e.tv" (1 group)

3 How does TV content impact on viewers?

This section contains a number of **explanations/theories** of how TV violence or TV sex impacts on viewers. First some **preliminary observations**:

- Views on the power of mass media to influence society have changed over the years: Powerful positive influence → powerful negative influence → small or mediated effects (other family influences and personality factors generally larger). Larger effects have been observed among children than among adults. Impacts can be stronger under certain conditions.
- Active audience rather than passive victims; uses & gratification approach.
- We have to do with circular and complex processes rather than with one-way linear impacts. Negative short term impacts (e.g. emotional reactions: a child is scared by violent TV scenes) can lead to qualitatively different long terms effects (e.g. attitudinal or behavioural responses: the child hates violence and avoids violent actions).
- There are three competing normative theories that are generally used to describe the effects of sexually explicit TV materials on viewers (Linz & Malamuth): The are (a) the conservative/moralist approach, (b) liberal theory, and (c) feminist theory.

3.1 Social learning theory:

Viewers accept TV characters or heroes as models for their own behaviour, resulting in one or more of the following:

- a **learning process** (e.g. that "violence works" as a way of solving problems or obtaining goals)
- **inhibiting** certain types of behaviour (especially if the TV hero is shown to be punished when performing this behaviour), and
- "**disinhibition**" or legalizing of actions previously frowned upon (e.g. if the TV hero has extramarital affair, the viewer may get the message that it is all right to do so).

3.2 Cultivation theory (Gerbner)

Viewers tend to incorporate aspects of the TV world – including fictional content - into their own perceptions of social reality. E.g. perceptions of what it looks like under the sea, in prison etc., are shaped by TV images, especially when there is no alternative source of contrary information:

- Continued exposure to a high incidence of TV violence contributes to the perception that the real world is a dangerous and scary place, and affects attitudes and behavioral reactions to the real world accordingly.
- Continued exposure to pornographic sex scenes on TV can contribute to the perception that marriage is not an essential institution in society.

3.3 Other theories/explanations

- **Desensitization/habituation (Zillmann):** Continued exposure to TV violence or pornography results in viewers getting used to these types of content. Violence or pornography becomes more acceptable. Viewers have less empathy with victims.
- **Arousal theory:** Violent or sexual content can create in viewers a short term state of readiness to act. Viewing pornography can also lead an increase in aggressive actions. Long term exposure to TV violence or TV sex leads to desensitization, making it more difficult for viewers to become aroused.
- **Information processing theory (Huesmann):** "Scripts" for violent action are internalized, making violent actions more likely.
- **Catharsis theory:** This approach suggests that TV violence gives viewers the opportunity to act out their aggression symbolically whilst watching it, thereby making them less aggressive afterwards. (Not supported by research).
- **Agenda setting theory:** When certain topics are emphasized on TV (e.g. by means of extended broadcasting time), this can cause those topics to seem relatively important for viewers. In this way TV can influence not so much what viewers think, but rather what they think about. TV therefore sets the agenda for viewers' thought processes.

4 Research results in SA

4.1 Studies on the impact of TV on aggression

Several large and long term follow-up effects studies under SA children have been conducted by the HSRC in partnership with the SABC over the years. It has been found that:

- TV viewing does make pupils more aggressive in the long term, but not excessively so (5% to 6% physically more aggressive over 5 years)
- Verbal aggression is increased in the short term.

- Certain personality and other factors increase the likelihood of children being influenced negatively by TV viewing to be more aggressive (e.g. a low self-esteem, being unyielding, being a boy, being relatively aggressive to start off with).

4.2 TV viewers reactions to violence on TV

- Qualitative research among groups of parents and teenagers showed that, for Nguni viewers, TV violence was completely unacceptable.
- Sotho viewers also found TV violence unacceptable, especially when it was broadcast during family viewing time
- TV violence was much more acceptable for English viewers, especially in action movies. Gory, explicit or gratuitous violence was unacceptable.
- Afrikaans groups found TV violence acceptable as part of a newsworthy news item (parents) or in an exciting or action programme (teenagers). However, TV violence was unacceptable when it involved racism or acts contrary to societal norms

4.3 TV viewers reactions to sex on TV

- Qualitative research among groups of viewers (parents and teenagers of different languages groups), found that for almost all groups, TV sex was acceptable when presented in an educational context.
- For the English and Sotho groups, TV sexual content was unacceptable if it was broadcast during times that young children watch TV.
- Afrikaans and Nguni groups objected most against sex scenes that were very explicit.

5 What can be done?

5.1 Viewers reaction to different types of control measures

Qualitative research among groups of viewers (parents and teenagers of different languages groups) yielded the following reactions:

- **Watershed scheduling:** All groups of viewers were in favour of this measure. Some groups (Afrikaans and English parents, as well as English teenagers) suggested that over week-ends a later watershed time should be used (currently it is 21:00).
- **Warnings in magazines and newspapers:** Although all groups of viewers were in favour of this measure, some reservations were expressed about the effectiveness of this measure.

- **On-screen warnings:** Most groups were strongly in favour, and some suggested that for these warnings to be more effective, they should stay on-screen for the whole duration of the programme.
- **Blurring of potentially offensive images:** This measure was not popular. Some groups stated it should only be used to protect someone's identity
- **Beeping out of bad language:** No. Only the Afrikaans parents were in favour of this measure, but then only if done very professionally
- **Editing out some entire scenes:** Most groups of parents were in favour of this measure, while most teenager groups were opposed to it.

5.2 Conclusion: Guidelines for broadcasters

The SABC's Research Directorate has developed a guideline for broadcasters on how to deal with TV violence, It is currently expanding this document to include guidelines on how to deal with scenes of a sexual nature.

Research on TV violence and sex in SABC programs



- 1 How much violence and sex is there on SABC TV?**
- 2 How is TV violence and sex perceived by viewers?**
- 3 How can TV content impact on viewers?**
- 4 Research results in SA**
- 5 What can be done?**

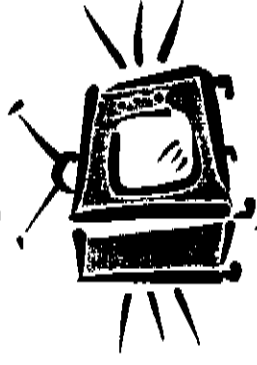
Violence and sex on prime time SABC1 programs

- ◆ **5.0/7.5 violent incidents per hour ('98/'99)**
- ◆ **85 % of programs have no violence**
- ◆ **91 % of programs have no sex**
- ◆ **90 % of programs have no nudity**



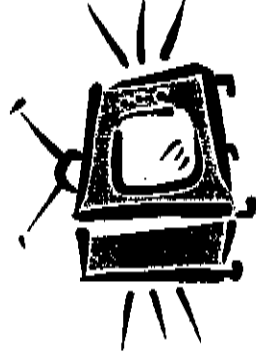
Violence and sex on prime time SABC2 programs

- ◆ **3.7/7.6 violent incidents per hour ('98/'98)**
- ◆ **70 % of prime time programmes have no violence**
- ◆ **89 % of prime time programmes have no sex**
- ◆ **91 % of prime time programmes have no nudity**

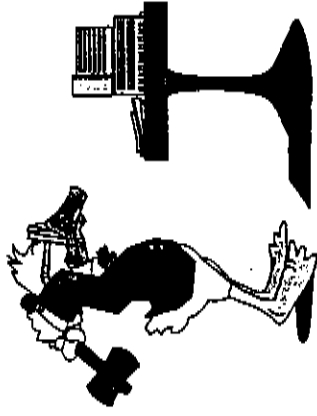


Violence and sex on prime time SABC3 programs

- ◆ **6.3/6.4 violent incidents per hour ('98/'99)**
- ◆ **65 % of prime time programmes have no violence**
- ◆ **84 % of prime time programmes have no sex**
- ◆ **87 % of prime time programmes have no nudity**

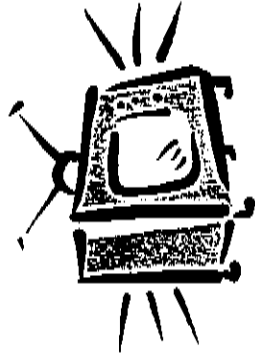


Viewers' perceptions of TV violence



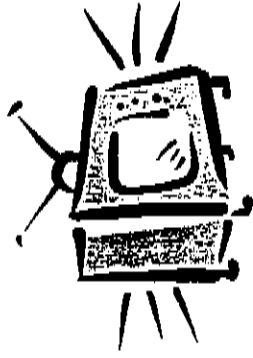
- ◆ SABC1: "Too much" (Nguni & Sotho parents & teenagers)
- ◆ SABC2: "Acceptable" (Most groups of parents)
"Too little" (Nguni & Sotho teenagers)
- ◆ SABC3: "Too little" (Most groups of teenagers)
"Too much" (English & Afrikaans parents)

Viewers' perceptions of sex on TV



- ◆ SABC1: "Too little" (Nguni parents & teenagers)
- ◆ "Too much" (Sotho parents & teenagers)
- ◆ "Unsure" (Most Afrikaans & English groups)
- ◆ SABC2: "Unsure" (Most groups)
- ◆ SABC3: Unclear pattern

**Viewers' perceptions of undesirable TV content:
SABC vs. other broadcasters**



- ◆ "Less than on M-Net or e.tv" (4 groups, mostly teenagers)
- ◆ "Same as on M-Net or e.tv" (3 groups)
- ◆ "More than on e.tv" (1 group)

How does TV content impact on viewers?

Some preliminary observations

- 1 Changing views on power of media**
 - Powerful positive → powerful negative influence
 - Small or mediated effects (stronger under certain conditions)
- 2 Active audience: Uses & gratification approach.**
- 3 Circular & complex impacts: Short & long term**
- 4 Three normative theories: sex on TV**
 - Conservative/moralist approach
 - Liberal theory
 - Feminist theory

Explanations/theories on how TV content impacts on viewers

1 Social learning theory:

TV characters as models: learning, inhibition, disinhibition

2 Cultivation theory

TV world incorporated into perceptions of social reality

3 Other theories

- **Desensitization/habituation:** Becoming used to it
- **Arousal theory:** State of readiness to act
- **Information processing theory:** Violent "scripts" internalized
- **Catharsis theory:** Acting out aggression symbolically
- **Agenda setting theory:** Certain topics become important

Research results in SA

Long term effects studies on the impact of TV on aggression



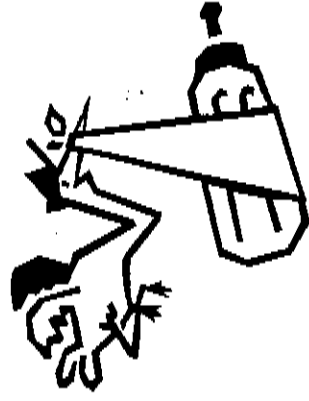
- ◆ TV viewing makes children slightly (5% to 6%) physically more aggressive in the long term
- ◆ Verbal aggression: Increased by TV in the short term
- ◆ Factors increasing chance of negative influence: Low self-esteem, unyielding, being male, initial aggression

Research results in SA TV viewers' qualitative reactions to violence on TV



- ◆ "TV violence always unacceptable" (Nguni speakers)
- ◆ "Unacceptable, especially during family viewing time" (Sotho speakers)
- ◆ "Acceptable in action movies, but not gory or gratuitous violence" (English viewers)
- ◆ Afrikaans groups: Acceptable when newsworthy (parents) or in action program (teenagers). Unacceptable: when racism or against societal norms

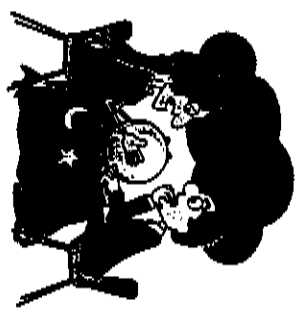
Research results in SA TV viewers' qualitative reactions to sex on TV



- ◆ TV sex generally acceptable in educational context
- ◆ TV sexual content unacceptable during times that young children watch TV (English & Sotho speakers)
- ◆ Afrikaans and Nguni groups: objected most against very explicit sex scenes



What can be done?



- ◆ **Watershed scheduling:** Yes (all groups). Later over week-ends?
- ◆ **Warnings in the press** Yes (all), but effective?
- ◆ **On-screen warnings:** Definitely. Stay for the whole program.
- ◆ **Blurring of images:** Not popular. Only to protect someone's ID
- ◆ **Beeping out of bad language:** Not popular at all
- ◆ **Editing out some entire scenes:** Most groups of parents in favour, but most teenager groups opposed to it