Violence in the Media

Case Study: FCC Seeks To Rein In Violent TV Shows

April 24, 2007, government and TV industry sources confirm the Federal Communications Commission’s plan to recommend a law to regulate broadcast and basic cable content. Federal regulators will recommend that Congress enact legislation to give the government unprecedented powers to limit “excessive violence” in entertainment programming. The FCC is concerned about the effects of television violence on children and has concluded that regulating TV violence is in the public interest. For decades the FCC has disciplined TV stations for airing sexually suggestive or indecent, speech and images. Never before has a network been reprimanded for violent programming.

Lawmakers and regulators believe that violent acts on television series – like torture scenes on Fox’s “24” and the excessive acts of violence from Fox’s “Prison Break” – have escalated in recent years, thus posing a continuous threat to kids. Social-science research has verified that prolonged exposure to viewing violence on TV has a harmful effect on children causing behaviors ranging from heightened anxiety to aggressive acts.

Fox’s 24 is presented in real time, with each season depicting a 24-hour period in the life of Jack Bauer, a U.S. government agent who fights domestic threats and terrorism. AlterNet, an award-winning news magazine and online community, describes “24” as having at least one big torture scene in every episode and it is more convincing than the White House at making the case for torture. The show made the “ticking time bomb” case for torture: we need to torture a suspect, or else thousands, or millions, will die in the next hour.
In response to “24’s” reputation for use of torture scenes, executive producer Howard Gordon told the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in 2007 that the show would be scaling back its torture scenes. Gordon told the newspaper, “What was once an extraordinary or exceptional moment is starting to feel a little trite…the idea of physical coercion or torture is no longer a novelty or surprise.”

The bases for the FCC’s proposal, is that there is a correlation between violence shown in the media and violent acts in real life. Dr. Leonard Berkowitz, one of the nation’s leading experts on violence, says the evidence is clear that the media have played a role in violent acts in the U.S.

Berkowitz states;

“They [the media] have a minor contributing role, inadvertent though it has been. They do have an influence just in reporting the stories…Basically, people in the audience who are susceptible to influence get ideas from what they read, what they see [and] what they hear. If their inhibitions are low, if they’re ready to act violently, they can act on those ideas.”

Excessive media coverage surrounding violent incidents is also a factor in promoting more of them; some people, especially children, get ideas that they can commit such crimes. Violent events are considered newsworthy and are regularly featured on the nightly news and 24-hour news programs. Descriptions of shootings, robberies, assault, and other violent crimes are usually the lead stories in a telecast. Berkowitz suggests the media should cover violent incidents less and to stop covering these violent incidents in such a dramatic manner, like television shows do. Such coverage and depictions in the media raises the odds that more violence will occur. But Berkowitz also states that the media “have to report the news” and that violence is an inevitable result of our society.

Since violence is regularly occurring in our society and it is heavily focused on in the news, it makes sense that entertainment media would incorporate violent content in their programs; violence is apart of our culture. The FCC is attempting to end this norm, and to do this, they are going after entertainment programming in the media.

Fox’s *Prison Break* is a suspense thriller that centers around two brothers and their friends and their life on the run from the government after they escape prison.

Below are screen shots from *Prison Break*:
The Parents Television Council said this about the series:

“Violence and language are major concerns on *Prison Break*. The two-hour premiere featured a fatal gunshot wound to the head, flashbacks of past trauma, firearms, torture, and a scene implying cannibalism.”

Series creator/executive producers Matt Olmstead and Paul Scheuring along with the cast, discuss the reason why their show is so violent:

Is there a way to regulate violent programming in a constitutional manner???
April 25, 2007, The FCC released their official report that states Congress could regulate violence on cable, satellite and broadcast television without violating the First Amendment. FCC chairman Kevin Martin said in a statement “Congress could provide parents more tools to limit their children’s exposure to violent programming in a constitutional way.”

Word of the report has alarmed executives in the broadcast and cable industries as well as the American Civil Liberties Union. Concerns center around how the agency would define violent programming and what would qualify for sanction. The ACLU reacted harshly to the report saying, “There are some things the government does well, but deciding what is aired and when on television is not one of them.”

Rupert Murdoch, whose News Corp airs Fox’s 24 and Prison Break, declined to comment at the time the report was issued.

**Exercise**

A technology that can help parents shield their children from objectionable programming is the V-chip. Each program gets a certain rating based on its content. The v-chip reads information encoded in the rated program and blocks programs from the set based upon the rating selected by the parent. The Parents Television Council (PTC) has also established their own set of ratings for television programs that can also help parents determine if a show is suitable for their children.

Pretend that you are a member of the PTC and watch BOTH of the two clips below.

1.  http://www.hulu.com/watch/68845/24-200-am---300-am

After, rate the program on the criteria of sex, language used, violence, and the show overall. Follow the PTC guidelines below.

- Show may include gratuitous sex, explicit dialogue, violent content, or obscene language, and is unsuitable for children.

- The show contains adult-oriented themes and dialogue that may be inappropriate for youngsters.

- Family-friendly show promoting responsible themes and traditional values.
Now give a recommendation for the age group the show is suitable for.

24 ______________

Prison Break________________

Violence is the foundation for much of the media we view. The Center for Media Literacy has come up with a basic formula to help understand the portrayal of violence in TV. There are three basics:

1. **Violence drives the storyline**: plots begin with violence, and impending conflict continues to drive the story and episode.
2. **Violence has no consequences:** the real world consequences of violence — the physical handicaps, financial expense, and emotional cost — are never a part of the plot. When people are killed on TV, they simply disappear; no one mourns their deaths.

3. **Television violence takes place in a world of good and bad:** Bad guys have to be really bad otherwise good guys wouldn’t be justified in clobbering them. They are driven to violence only as a last resort in their struggle against these bad, bad people.

From the episodes you just watched and rated, write down as many specific examples you witnessed that follow the 3 basics of TV violence.

---

**Analysis Criteria**

1. **Who decides the Access we have to information?** How much control do you have from what you see on television? The FCC is proposing that congress has the right to regulate violence on television. Do you think the government should be able to regulate the content on TV? If and when you have children, do you think you will regulate what they have access to watch on television by installing a v-chip or another type of technology?

2. **How Aware are you of the violence in media?** How many television shows do you watch on a regular bases involve some form of violence? If the government does start controlling content on TV, how will that effect the power of the media?

3. **Assessing** the shows you watch, if violence were taken out of them, would the quality of the show suffer? Do you believe there is a time and place for violence on TV? If so, when and where? Do real images of violence shown on the news media affect you the same way violence on scripted shows do?

Assess both the photographs shown above and the episodes you watched, determine which form of violence would be most damaging to a child.

4. **Do you Appreciate** what the media has done so far to help protect children from seeing mature content (ex: parental discretions and ratings system for TV shows)? What else should the media do to prevent the
government from controlling content on television? How appreciative are you for the FCC? Are they looking out for your best interest?

5. If you saw a graphic image or violent act or heard explicit speech on TV, and were offended in any way, what type of Action would you take next? Would you consider filing a complete with the FCC? Do you think the public has the power to control what is shown on TV?

Resources

- Center for Media Literacy: educational organization dedicated to promoting and supporting media literacy education as a framework for accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating and participating with media content. 
  http://www.medialit.org/
  Violence in the Media: http://www.medialit.org/focus/viol_home.html

- Federal Communications Commission: an independent United States government agency responsible for regulating interstate and international communications by radio, television, wire, satellite and cable.
  http://www.fcc.gov/

- Accuracy in Media (AIM): a non-profit, a grassroots citizen watchdog of the news media that critiques botched and bungled news stories and sets the record straight on important issues that have received slanted coverage. 

- Parents Television Council: the nations most influential advocacy organization protecting children against sex, violence, and profanity in entertainment media. 
  http://www.parentstv.org/

- AlterNet: online community that creates original journalism and amplifies the best of hundreds of other independent media sources. Aim is to inspire action and advocacy on media, the environment, human rights and civil liberties, social justice and more. 
  http://www.alternet.org/
  Torture on TV: http://www.alternet.org/story/46757/

- The Washington Post: 2007 article on the FCC’s proposed report to regulate television violence on broadcast and basic cable. 
Author

Pat Cory, student, Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York, USA

CREDITS:
- Media & Values cover, taken from Issue #62, Spring 1993
- Photo of Jack Bauer courtesy of Fox’s 24
- Photo of woman strapped to chair, courtesy of Fox’s 24
- Photo of man tied to radiator, courtesy of Fox’s Prison Break, season 2
- Photo of woman leaning over dead body, courtesy of Fox’s Prison Break, season 2, episode 8: Deadfall
- Photo of man and bloody woman, courtesy of Fox’s Prison Break, season 4
- Photo of woman with bullet wound to head, courtesy of Fox’s Prison Break, season 2, episode 1
- Photo of man tied to chair, courtesy of Fox’s Prison Break, season 3, episode 9
- Photo of 2 men in front of burning car, courtesy of Fox’s Prison Break, season 2, episode 13: The Killing Box
- Photo of cast of Prison Break, courtesy of 20th Century Fox
- Cartoon taken from article by Barbara Osborn on the Center for Media Literacy website