

# Childhood, Violence and Television:

## Television Use and Childhood Perception of Violence in Television

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### ABSTRACT

*This report presents the main results attained in a study carried out in 2001 by the Violence and Television Research Group at the Blanquerna College of Communication Science dealing with the use of television and the children's reception of violence on television.*

*In La violència en la mirada we already pointed to the need to promote a given type of research about violence on television, contextualized in our social and cultural ambit. This would be a type of research not limited to study the television media or "violence" contents in its programme planning, but rather one which would show sensitiveness towards the viewers' protagonism and responsibility as to the use of television and the reception of television messages.*

*The study of violence on television is a complex and difficult issue which requires a methodological strategy which is more sophisticated than the one typically used in most studies on content. That is the reason why the research methodology we have used combines quantitative and qualitative tools in a way which enables the description and analysis of the social use of television in the family field and allows a profound study on the knowledge of how children audiences perceive violence on television.*

*This is the reason why five public primary school centres, located in different areas in the city of Barcelona, were selected, and students ranging from 7 to 12 years of age were chosen. Regarding the quantitative approach, 443 individuals were surveyed through a questionnaire. As to the qualitative approach, 8 discussion groups, (focus groups), were put into practise.*

*The initial purpose is to describe the customs, television uses, and the ways television programmes are consumed, and evaluate the considerations about violence made by boys and girls from 7 to 12 years of age in different social and economic extracts in the city of Barcelona. Secondly – and as primary objective – we pose a qualitative approach to the perception children and pre-adolescent youngsters have about the different types of violence present in fiction television programmes.*

## Introduction

**T**his report presents the results attained in a study carried out in 2001 by the Violence and Television Research Group at the Blanquerna College of Communication Science, (URL), dealing with the use of television and children's perception of violence on television.<sup>1</sup>

This study starts with the confirmation that children are among the age groups which watch television most. Audience surveys state that children sit in front of the small screen for more than three hours every day on average, at the same time verifying that an important part of the television programmes preferred by children are aimed at adult audiences and broadcast outside children's viewing time.

Apocalyptic discourses, so present at the turn of the century we have just experienced and so full of bad omens as to the destiny of humankind, have television among their favourite targets. Coming from "common sense" – and often from the intellectual field – there is a tendency to make of television one of the main scapegoats of our time. We live in a time full of uncertainties. The uneasiness and discomfort many citizens share as to our current society project over television, which thus can be thought of as the starting point for all our evil doings.

On the other hand, over recent decades there has been a considerable increase in social awareness regarding violence. It is expressed at a number of levels and it reflects in a social concern about the excess of violent scenes which are present on television.<sup>2</sup> It is also shown in the increasing uneasiness there is about the effect violent images have on children, considered by many to be a particularly vulnerable *risk group*. For example, there is increasing concern as to the influence of television on children. Some health-related reports point at the negative effects television has in children: sleeping disorders, (insomnia, night terrors and nightmares); slowness in speech, (poor vocabulary and scarce verbal fluency); difficulties at school, (learning problems); anxiety to satisfy advertising inducement; aggressiveness increase or apathy, (lack of interest when faced by everyday stimulæ).<sup>3</sup>

Most studies carried out on violence and television focus on violence content and assume there is a direct-cause relationship between violence on television and violence in society, even though they do not often state which are the mechanisms through which this influence is activated. These studies carry out content analysis which, undoubtedly, are a necessary condition to verify the influence and social repercussion of violence on television. Nevertheless, we believe it is not enough and we think, and such is the case in this research, that it is a priority to carry out a study of children's reception of this television violence.

That is so because we have been considering what television is for children for many years. We believe this question is rather misleading to solve the problem. The issue is not – as we have already stated on previous occasions – to ask what it is that television does to children, but rather ask what use boys and girls make of television and what the programmes they watch mean to them.

In *La violència en la mirada* (2001) we already pointed to the need to promote some type of research about violence on television, in the context of our social and

cultural ambit. This would be a type of research not limited to study the television media or “violence” contents in its programme planning, but rather one which would show sensitivity towards the viewers’ active involvement and responsibility as to the use of television and the perception of television messages. That is why we believe it is necessary – bearing in mind the viewers’ sensitiveness and perception – to redefine the notion of “violence” on television to grant it the meaning which best applies to the present times.

The concept of violence has also changed over the years. Norbert Elias states that the *civilization process*,<sup>4</sup> which is not linear or irreversible, allows human beings to achieve a higher control and repression of aggressive impulses favouring a quite precise pursuit of social rules and conventions. Thanks to this process, physical violence has become intolerable to western eyes, but there are other more invisible and subtle forms of violence that we often accept or exercise without realising or with unspoken agreement. In the theoretical research<sup>5</sup> proceeding this applied research, we already observed different types of human violence and proposed a definition of violence adequate to our contemporary context. As a research group we have been interested in defining types of violence, and observing the level of formalization this violence shows in the television discourse as well as the intensity with which children viewers perceive it.

Finally, we mean to locate our research in the international communicative research context. Broadly speaking, and simplifying greatly, we may consider there are two main theoretical approaches which direct current scientific research on this issue:

1. There is a first approach – defended by authors such as Bandura and Walters, (1963), Berkowitz, (1996), or Friedrich & Huston, (1986) – which maintains, from a behavioural psychology point, that television broadcasts violent behaviour which favours a modelled and conditioned learning of aggressive guidelines. Television becomes an important *risk factor* and the most important ingredient in the *Causal Effect Theory* between television violence viewing and aggressive behaviour.
2. A second point of view, defended by authors related to different social science fields, adopts a more inter-disciplinary approach and aims to give explanation in a comprehensive and integral way, bearing in mind the importance of psychic, social or cultural factors present in the television programme planning. From this point of view, which we feel closer to, it is taken into account that one of the key roles of television is its ability to divulge stereotypes and social values which are not always in harmony with society ideals based on dialogue and peace. Following this logic, a better care for audiovisual programming and, specially, television content regulation would have to be requested from institutional responsible agents, so that the presence of positive models and altruistic values would increase.

The research panorama in our country is quite similar to the international situation. Nevertheless, we can verify a scarce number of research tasks, ( in fact, it is an incipient tradition which has not given important results yet). There is a predominance of effective studies – which basically use quantitative methodologies –

and whose aim is to determine the influence level television violence has in children audiences. Through the observation of different studies we can verify how the preconceived belief that television generates violence may mislead research and mainly condition the results of the study.

Facing this panorama, and not meaning to stop carrying out quite a wide survey, we would like to highlight the qualitative aspect this study has regarding the social use of television made by children. Qualitative studies are of great use, since they allow more global data on social and family children relationships to be obtained.

Task results must contribute to a better understanding of the problem and could be of use so professionals and responsible communication agents could have more understanding tools and more judgement elements to be able to assume a well-based position concerning the presence of violence in different television channels, ( both public and private), specially during children and youth viewing times.

## **1. Childhood, violence and television as objects to study**

Specialized research had held, in general terms, a truly poor concept of childhood and human condition, (Thompson, 1999). We are dealing with a kind of tradition truly obsessed about finding proof or evidence that television is harmful and that violence images on television have a perverse effect in children.

We propose a type of research not limited to studying the television medium and “ violence content” in its programme planning, but rather a study which is sensitive with the viewers’ personal involvement and responsibility as to television use and the reception of television messages. We believe specialized research must be re-orientated and go from “content analysis to reception analysis”. That is why it is necessary – bearing in mind the viewers’ sensitiveness and perception – to re-define the notion of “violence” on television to grant it a meaning which is appropriate to the present times. This study starts by considering these premises, where the child viewer is seen as a valid speaker and the protagonist in construction of meaning.

### **Conceptual approaches to childhood**

The concept of childhood implicit in many audiovisual proposals offered to the children’s world responds to quite a simplistic and stereotyped idea of childhood. The child is seen as a passive being, ignorant and vulnerable when facing social mass media. This fact is not exclusive of some social mass media professionals, but rather it also responds to a firmly rooted perception existing in our society about childhood and the human being. The concept of childhood is the result of a wide historical process where there was a prevalent idea of the child as a passive and pre-intelligent being, (the child as a practically unfinished being).

Nowadays, an alternative concept is proposed, one in which the child is thought to be co-constructor in his own learning. Just as Malaguzzi, an Italian pedagogue internationally known thanks to his pedagogic proposals in the Emilia

Romana region, pointed out, “our option is a child who already from birth holds such a wish to feel a part of the world that actively uses a capability and learning network, enabling him to organize relationships and personal, interpersonal, social, cognitive, affective and even symbolic orientation maps.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, we think of the child as an active being, protagonist of his own personal autonomy processes when thinking and acting, and with full personal competence and communicative skills. Considering these estimates, we believe it is relevant to think of children as interlocutors in the research in process, in which we try to find out what their perceptions concerning television and violence are.

### Children stories and violence

It is important to highlight the relevance of children stories as historical reference prior to television. They are stories which, in previous times, were already an issue of concern for adults, due to the fear generated by the information children around the world received.

At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the French Revolution triggers a number of events in the social founding of human rights and also children rights. The awareness of the need to protect and take care of children awakes, adult sensitivity towards children increases and, specially in privileged classes, Rousseauian ideas about the innocent child are assumed: “The child needs to be a child before becoming a man, since he has his own ways of being, thinking and feeling”.<sup>7</sup>

Just as Dahlberg, Moss and Pence point out<sup>8</sup>, the idea of childhood generated by Rousseau’s concept of child is understood as a period of innocence in a person’s life. It is believed that boys and girls have enough capacity to search for Virtue, Truth and Beauty when, on the contrary, we face a kind of society which corrupts the innate goodness children are born with. According to the authors this child image: “generates in adults a wish to protect children from the corrupt world surrounding them – violent, oppressive, commercialised and exploitative – building a kind of setting in which the child is offered protection, continuity and safety”.

There are a number of trends in psychology and pedagogy which argue about the convenience of making an explicit presence of violence in literary stories addressed to children. We can not forget that many children stories and tales, such as, for example, Little Red Riding Hood, are “violent”, in any known version. It is logical then there is adult concern about *violent contents* in these children stories, and that we want to defend children from a number of “negative” values and elements present in our society. Nevertheless, we are dealing with a moderation issue. Certain restrictions could be established, but we should avoid becoming – just as Brenda Bellorín states-<sup>9</sup> literary or cultural censors.

The presence of audiovisual mass media makes the existence, illusory, of this children’s world – fantastic, ludic and innocent – and separated from the adult world, more difficult. This is one of the reasons why some parents and teachers are led to think of television as a danger and a threat to children, since they have difficulties to exercise an effective control over this device which invades the household. Television is a window which allows us to contact different realities, (some of which are considered not to be very laudable for children).

We believe the issue is not to isolate the child from fear, or from disturbing social situations, but rather measure out the use of these stories, teaching boys and girls a number of reading keys and to develop their own defences to face up to them. According to Bellorín, it would be a mistake to deprive children from approaching the adult world through reading. The author expands her reasoning to television use and the access to the world of Internet.

### **Research methodology**

Most specialized research has questioned which is the incidence the presence of violent scenes or images in fiction programmes has in audiences who are exposed to these images. Children are thought to be a specially sensitive and vulnerable type of audience. These kinds of research respond to a concern and a social and political worry: What is the incidence television, (violent images on television), has in children? Our research task aimed at turning the issue around and changing the meaning of the meaning.

1. Which is the use children make of television?
2. What kind of reading do they make of violent images?

The study of violence on television is a complex and difficult issue which requires a methodological strategy which is more sophisticated than the one typically used in most studies on content. That is the reason why the research methodology we have used combines quantitative and qualitative tools in a way which enables the description and analysis of the social use of television in the family field and allows a profound study of the knowledge of how children audiences perceive violence on television.

The initial purpose is to describe the customs, television uses and the ways television programmes are consumed, and evaluate the considerations about violence made by boys and girls in different social and economic extracts in the city of Barcelona. Secondly – and as a primary objective – we pose a qualitative approach to the perception children and pre-adolescent youngsters have of the different types of violence present in fictional television programmes.

This is the reason why five public primary school centres, located in different areas of the city of Barcelona, were selected, and students ranging from 7 to 12 years of age were chosen. Regarding the quantitative approach, 443 individuals were surveyed via a questionnaire. As to the qualitative approach, 8 discussion groups, (focus groups), were put into practise.

The exploratory characteristics of this study and, specially, those of the individuals interviewed, (children and pre-adolescents), recommended the formulation of a brief questionnaire and a number of closed questions written in a truly clear and understandable way. *Closed questions* restrain individual freedom and prevent studying nuances in depth, but hold the advantage of allowing a simple answer and making following data exploitation easier.

On the other hand, and bearing in mind the nature of this research recom-

mends an eminently qualitative approach, a second phase was set up, based on discussion groups, (*focus groups*). It could be defined as an accurately planned conversation, designed to obtain information from a defined interest area, in a permissive and not contrived atmosphere. The basic objective of *discussion groups* is to set up a relaxing and comfortable discussion for the participants who unfold their ideas and comment on them together. The open character in the discussion enables the research team to step out from a previously established guideline and explore unexpected deviations which are not possible in more rigid situations. On the other hand, analysing the data obtained in focus groups is a very complex task. The comments have to be analyzed within the group context and special attention must be paid to avoid extrapolating the results attained in discussion groups to analyze the situation in the general population.

In the *focus group* a number of analysis categories were designed which centre on the observation of three aspects already mentioned were established: the type of violence, the formalization of violence and the degree of intensity and seriousness of violence. All three categories are mutually influenced and have allowed us to establish some criteria to choose four television programme sequences to be watched by children and from which the *focus group* discussion could be set up.

Finally, we must add that, thanks to the interaction with the boys and girls in the *focus group*, there appeared new basic categories which have also been included in the study:

- Distinction between reality and fiction
- Formal and aesthetic parameters
- Pleasure and "displeasure" signs
- Ethical considerations

## Results

### Quantitative study data

Once the field task was carried out and the survey data attained, we can expose in synthesis the main results achieved:

1. General data show that 82% of the boys and girls interviewed live with both their parents: namely, they form a nuclear-type family unit. **We must consider the use of television in a domestic context bearing in mind the family structure and the type of relationship existing among the members of the family.**

2. **The television set is present at the home of all the children and adolescents interviewed.** 72% of children have more than one TV set at home. The television has, therefore, a remarkable presence in the domestic geography and is located in an notable place in the house dining room.

3. **There is a positive correlation between the number of TV sets and the number of hours children spend in front of the screen.** That is to say, the higher

the number of TV sets found at home, the longer the duration of television viewing.

4. **Watching television takes up an important part of children's time.** 83% of the boys and girls interviewed show a subjective perception they watch *quite* or *a lot* of television. Only 17% believe they watch it *little*.

5. **Before and immediately after going to school is when television is watched the most.** For example, the time lapses which accumulate more television consumption are the *afternoon* – between 6 and 8 pm – and also the *evening* – dinner and after-dinner time.

6. Children believe they have a **relatively important control over the television remote control device**, which enables them to change the channel. 47,4% of the total number say that, somehow, they *share* this decision with their parents, whereas 30,1% state only *they* choose the programmes.

7. The boys and girls interviewed **admit they also do other things while they watch television**. The activity of watching television is done, almost always, (81,6% of children interviewed), along with other activities like *eating*, *playing* or *doing the homework*, following this order.

8. Two of every three of the children interviewed state **they do not feel they are being "invigilated" while they watch television**. On the contrary, 45% of children – specially the youngest ones – show they like being in company.

9. **The children programme most watched by the children interviewed is *Pokemon***, with a 19,4% share. 20,3% of children like this programme. It takes up the interest of boys and girls from 7 to 10 years old, and specially of 8 and 9 years old, whereas it has little appeal to children between 11 and 12 years of age. Most programmes for children broadcast by television channels are watched by a scarce 5% of boys and girls. The three programmes, not exclusively for children, mostly watched are *The Simpsons*, (23,2%), *Veterinaris*, (17,8), and *Pasa palabra*, (12,4%).

10. **The censorship exercised by adults as to television programming is not very important and highly heterogeneous**, since it diversifies according to the variety in television offer and the plurality in the preferences expressed by children.

### Qualitative study results

Finally, we present the result from the qualitative part, central focus point for this study.

### Television culture

The children who participated in discussion groups enjoy, generally speaking, a remarkable *television culture*. It is not the time to judge if this is good or bad. We only want to highlight children show an exhaustive knowledge of television programming which presents a wide and diverse range of programmes. At the same time, they have a clear idea of genre conventions and notably master the interpretation codes in television programmes.



### **Distinction between reality and fiction**

The children interviewed have a notable capability to clearly distinguish between what is *real* from that which is *fiction*. Often there is suspicion that children use television elements as a mechanism to get away from the world and every day life. Nevertheless, the study states that children can go from one meaning sector to the other relatively easily. In general terms, the kind of imitation children may carry out through playing does not worry them. They are truly troubled by mimicry possibilities when facing certain eschatological or not playful conducts appearing on the screen. At given moments they may be carried away by imagination or fantasy, but that does not mean they ignore that every day reality is the true reality. Quite curiously, children of all ages project their concern about imitating given behaviour seen on television over younger children, but without feeling they are involved.

### **Difference in age**

7 and 8 year-old children develop pre-logical thinking in their construction of reality and connect with certain fictional stories or characters easily. At this age, they take physical violence situations as a kind of game.

When they then turn 11 and 12 years old, boys and girls can express themselves very well through verbal discourse. They show a logical type of reasoning and are able to adopt a further and more critical point of view when facing given forms of violence. After discussing the results attained we are in a position to point to a number of observations we think are highly relevant:

### **Recognition of violence and perception of intensity**

Children groups – specially boys and girls of 11 and 12 years of age – have a remarkable ability to elaborate a thinking discourse which allows them to express their opinion about violence on television. Children consider *physical violence* to be true violence. That does not mean they are not sensitive when facing given types of verbal or symbolic violence. At the same time, we observe a considerable capability to establish a scale of violence which goes beyond the most direct and graphic type, as it is the case with physical violence: they are able, specially the 11 and 12 year-old group, to understand verbal attack as a way to humiliate and ridicule. Normally, violence present in news or documentary programmes is experienced as a type of more intense [more serious] reality than the violence appearing in fictional programmes.

### **Ethical considerations**

Among the smallest children, ethical considerations remain far from their spontaneous discourse. In any case, they make themselves understood through verbalising their familiarity with the scenes chosen and their most immediate appreciation or dislike. Thus, given aspects highly related to their knowledge of the material watched is commented on out loud during its viewing, ( they have seen it before, they explain other episodes...). In older groups, in general, there appears a

reflexive and personal consideration, specially critical with stereotyped and simplistic contents. Older children express, consequently, a demand of more elaborated and careful content in their reasoning, even if they are capable of enjoying the playful aspect animation gives them.

### Conclusions

Television has, along with other mass media, unquestionable social and cultural significance. We believe, however, that, speaking in general terms and even in specialized research, there is a tendency to give excessive dimension to its importance, be it for good – when television is considered to be a source of education – or for evil – when television is to blame for bad influences. The so-called omnipresence and omnipotence of television may lead us to forget and despise the importance of other social and cultural instances – such as school or family – which continue to hold a considerable weight and great social responsibility in children education.

Where does fear and fascination in front of the television come from? What are the causes of the distress about violence in our present world? Why is there such an intense concern for children? It is not easy to answer this question and maybe this is not the place to do it. We only mean to make a situation of fear and distress known, a situation which affects wide population sectors considering the topic of violence, television and childhood.

Giovani Sartori's book *Homo videns*, (1998), shows the danger that – according to the Italian political expert – television brings to an *image culture* dominated world. We think it is not good to turn television – be it as an object or a device – into a subject or protagonist. People are – should be – the real protagonists in social life.

We are aware of the importance and responsibility of communication professionals. Nevertheless, we do not want to fall into some media-centered concept which tends to systematically place general mass media and television specifically at the core of social life. Much analysis of television fails to place it in a certain social context. Hence, this tendency to ignore television or rather place it at the centre of discussion.

There is a need to change the traditional way of looking at the social effects of television and maintaining an approach which focuses more on its social use and the viewers' personal involvement in message interpretation. This change also means planning anew the methodological strategies used in the field of research. Following this trend, we insist the viewers' personal disposition and the social and family context in which they watch television should be borne in mind. It is necessary to keep a distance as to the television as a study subject, and avoid projecting our fears and distress because of it. We should keep – just as Bourdieu would say – a constant epistemological invigilance attitude.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Busquet, J. (Coord), Aran, S., Barata, F., Medina, P., Morón, S. (2002), *Infància, violència i televisió: usos televisius i percepció infantil de la violència a la televisió*.

<<http://audiovisualcat.net/recerca/presentació-violència.html>>

<sup>2</sup> A CAC study published in 1998 highlights that the television time lapse going from 5 to 7 pm is the one with a highest concentration of violent acts. CONSELL DE L'AUDIOVISUAL DE CATALUNYA. *La representació de la violència a la televisió: una aproximació quantitativa a la programació de ficció emesa a Catalunya durant una setmana*, (2<sup>nd</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> June 1998). Barcelona: CAC, 1998

<sup>3</sup> MUÑOZ, J.J.; PEDRERO, L.M. *La televisión y los niños*. Salamanca: Cervantes, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> ELIAS, N. *El proceso de civilización*. México: FCE, 1987

<sup>5</sup> ARAN, S.; BARATA, F.; BUSQUET, J.; MEDINA, P. *La violència en la mirada. L'anàlisi de la violència a la televisió*. Barcelona: Papers D'estudi, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> MALAGUZZI, L. "Converses amb L. Malaguzzi". *Temes d'Infància* [Barcelona] (1996), no. 25

<sup>7</sup> ROUSSEAU, J.J. *Emile, Oeuvres complètes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.

<sup>8</sup> DAHLBER, G.; MOSS, P.; PENCE, A. "Més enllà de la qualitat". *Temes d'Infància*. [Barcelona] (1999), no 34, pg.91.

<sup>9</sup> "Our latent moralism leads us to do whatever possible and impossible to perpetuate that we understand as childhood. I believe we must stop for a moment and ponder if, with our overprotective attitude, we are truly taking care of them or if, on the contrary, we are compelling them towards defencelessness in front of the adult world [...]. All this punitive, timid and critical relationship which promotes that which is politically correct, leads to a strict access to books, following the premise that reading good things will make us good and reading bad or incorrect things makes bad and incorrect individuals of us. As much as I like to believe in the power of books, as much as I idealize literature, these premises keep on looking a bit superfluous and lacking in basis to me". BELLORÍN, B. *And, had the Little Red Riding Hood read politically incorrect books, would the wolf have her inside its stomach today?*

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