

Violence, Sex and TV: The Adolescent View

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this article is to present the results of research where the main aim was to assess the impact that sex and violence on TV may have on people at a time of growth and the search for identity as is adolescence.

The work arose from the need to respond to a series of general concerns that parents and teachers spoke of with respect to adolescent behaviour, such as apathy, violence and precocity in the manifestation of adult behaviour (the consumption of alcohol and drugs, and sexual relations). Television is often accused of provoking this situation. However, most of the data available are of a quantitative nature and only refer to what young people see on TV and the time they spend watching it. We have information on the use that an audience makes of television, but not on when, how or why. In particular, we do not know how young people value what they see on the screen when it comes to interpreting the world, or how television references mix with others from the family, peer group, socioeconomic environment or individual peculiarities to give rise to this interpretation. In the case of adolescent viewers, we also run up against the practical absence of research work aimed at studying their television behaviour, even though there is a wealth of statements about the damage TV consumption does throughout their lives and how it affects the work of other institutions, such as schools.

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2. Goal and theoretical basis

The goal was to find out how young people interpret, assess and respond to sex and violence on TV. The aim was to investigate how they use these references (just one part of the context in which they live with other references) when it comes to giving meaning to their experiences and relationships with others, and to find out the way they make sense of the programmes that most attract them. I thus had to firstly identify the basic elements behind their television preferences. I also wanted to know young people's expectations about television programming, i.e., the types of shows they would like to watch and why, and how these shows could contribute to their information and entertainment needs.

The aim of the work was to understand the degree to which adolescents are active interpreters of the messages they receive about sex and violence from TV, and where the references come from that they use to make this interpretation.

The starting point for the study was a number of theoretical approximations of a cognitive nature that aim to study people and their interpretations about the world. Within this field, I used both the perspective of symbolic interactionism and the theory of uses and interpretations. I also used the work done by social scientists such as Edgar Morin, with his complexity theory, with which he tries to approach the study of social processes. The latter perspective makes it possible to study human events on the basis of taking into consideration such important phenomena as the context in which they are produced, as well as things that involve not just the organised juxtaposition of parts but also a non-simple interaction between them and other fundamental elements of the environment.

3. Methodology and sample

The research was based on a qualitative study. The number of elements involved (adolescents, television, family, peer group, violence, sex, television preferences) and the multiple relations established between them made the analysis harder and also made it necessary to use data-gathering instruments that would allow the most accurate possible vision of the reality being studied. I thus decided to use a number of research techniques that would facilitate an approximation to the reality that the adolescents chosen for the study experienced. I asked them to participate in activities that ranged from individual ones to ones they had to work on together with their peer groups, as I considered the two situations to be fundamental aspects in understanding behaviour and attitudes. I also wanted the results of each research phase to serve as the starting point for the following phase.

The research work consisted of four phases: a questionnaire, the keeping of diaries, interviews and discussion groups. The exploratory nature of the study and its qualitative approach made it necessary to work with a reduced sample. The aim was not to make detailed observations of differences relating to social class, age or gender, but to work with the young people by observing the features they had in common as an age group that shares similar motivations, communicative needs and previous experience with television. I sought adolescents who lived in an urban environment and formed part of a mixed group both in terms of gender and social class. To ensure the representation of young people from different socio-cultural backgrounds, I chose to work with two private schools (one religious) and two public schools.

The sample consisted of 97 children from 2nd and 4th grade ESO (compulsory secondary education), i.e., aged 12 to 14, from the following high schools: Pere Calders (Cerdanyola del Vallès), Milà i Fontanals (Raval, Barcelona), IES Can Puig (Sant Pere de Ribes), Escola Súnion and Col·legi Pare Manyanet (Les Corts, Barcelona).

Most of the children in the sample were from Catalan families, with the exception of the students from Milà i Fontanals, all of whom were from immigrant families.

4. Results of the research

Throughout each research phase, I could see that the children had clear television preferences and that, contrary to what might be expected, television was not generally a model on which they based their values about violence or with which they identified in terms of behaviour and expectations about sex. Rather, the family and social environment, together with the features characteristic to adolescence, seemed to account for the process of their reactions towards violence and their feelings with regard to sexuality. The study results also suggested a number of criteria for guiding media education addressed at young people and a series of recommendations for the Catalonia Broadcasting Council.

Television Preferences

The majority of the students in this study watched TV for entertainment purposes and to while away time when there was nothing else to do. The study found that watching TV was not a priority leisure activity. The interviewees preferred to 'hang out with' or go out with friends, play on the computer or video console and surf the internet rather than watch TV.

The times they tuned in coincided with family meal times and the period after meals. The programmes they said were their favourites were the ones shown at primetime and generally designed for family viewing.

The reasons behind their television preferences suggested consumption related with leisure and free time and thus tended towards entertainment programming.

Their favourite shows were fiction series and, more specifically, Spanish series that featured teenagers as central figures in each episode. Examples included *Un paso adelante*, *Los Serrano* and *Aquí no hay quien viva*. Fictional programmes with a good dose of suspense and/or humour also led preferences with regard to foreign programmes, such as the US criminal investigation series *CSI* and the veteran American cartoon series *The Simpsons*. The comedy show *Una altra cosa*, although not a fictional programme, was also popular.

After the abovementioned shows came series such as *El cor de la ciutat*, *Pasapalabra*, *Charmed*, *Shin Chan*, *Cuéntame cómo pasó*, *El Diario de Patricia*, *Friends* and

Hospital General. One curious incident was the relatively frequent mention of the programme *Pasapalabra* among the group of immigrant children, who said the show helped them learn new words and concepts in Spanish.

Comedy, adventure, suspense and romance were the major attraction of the programmes the children chose as their favourites. They also said they watched the news because their parents did and to know what was going on in the world.

On the other hand, they said they did not like children's programmes and were highly critical of reality shows and other 'rubbish TV'. They said the main reason they watched or had seen reality shows was to while away time when there was nothing better to do.

The children felt represented when there was a character their own age on the screen. This attracted them because it allowed them to identify with the character in some way. However, this identification did not necessarily mean they would imitate the character's behaviour, but rather could understand his or her problems and the reasons for their actions. It seems the degree of identification with characters and their situations helps spark off and maintain their interest in a particular fiction series.

One important finding from the study was that the children would like to watch TV shows addressed at them that were not necessarily fiction. They also wanted television to talk about aspects of the reality that surrounded them and which did not usually come up, such as drugs, sexuality, poverty or the serious problems a family might be going through. It is as though they were asking television to help explain things in their environment that confused them and in some cases worried them. They wanted shows that spoke to them and their concerns in a realistic tone and in which they could take part. They strongly disliked the use of a paternalistic tone and wanted programmes to be both entertaining and informative. They particularly disliked traditional educational programmes.

In terms of the fiction shows they regularly followed, the children were very critical of ones that had become tired or that represented an altered reality. In general, they appeared to have a good handle on the mechanisms that TV series use to carry episodes forward, and they also identified the stereotypes that abound in TV series, but considered them necessary for the shows to be accepted by the audience.

The children appeared to be fairly well aware of the positive values (struggle between good and evil, the promotion of friendship, respect for the environment and solidarity) shown on the programmes. Also, when talking about shows they did not like, they mentioned the negative values they included, particularly violent content, gender stereotypes and the use of rude language. On the other hand, they did not often mention aesthetic elements, such as sets, the clothes presenters wore, etc.

The fact that they used television basically as a form of entertainment and overwhelmingly preferred fiction programmes does not necessarily mean they are satisfied with current TV schedules. Many were very critical of the programmes on offer, particularly reality shows. When asked what they would like to watch on TV, it was a pleasant surprise to find they all had something to say. However, the programmes basically fell into two groups: fiction shows with basic features of comedy, adventure and suspense present throughout the narration, and programmes that were informative but also entertaining and which addressed their interests.

Violence and TV

Although the children generally said there was a lot of violence on TV, their perception of it had many nuances. The main one was the distinction they made between violence on fiction shows and those that had some relation with reality. The information gathered suggested that children liked TV shows and films with violence only when there was another attraction, i.e., humour, fantasy or a good script that explained (but did not necessarily justify) the reason for the violence onscreen. On the other hand, they did not like to watch violent content, even if fictional, that was too similar to references they could have in real life.

Informative programmes (news and some documentaries) were mentioned as the shows with the most violence, and featured the type of violence that affected them most. They felt that the real violence in society was much worse than the violence represented on fiction shows. They wanted to watch the news to stay informed, but at the same time complained about having to see violence and were aware of the fact that violence is newsworthy.

Another aspect reflected in the study was that the children, despite having seen many violent acts of fiction on TV and

computer games, did not present signs of insensitivity towards violence. We could even say that television seemed to work as a vehicle to raise awareness about real-life violence. News programmes helped the children learn about war, terrorism and violence against women - the three things they most frequently said they would like to change about the world. For the children, television was a vehicle for uncovering the injustices in the world and for becoming aware of the need to think about others. It also made them feel lucky that they live in a relatively calm and comfortable environment. However, this was not the case for the children in the sample who experienced violence in their daily environment, which affected them much more profoundly than any violent act seen on TV.

The study found that the violence they saw on TV was never a model of behaviour for the children. Also, they did not see it as a way to resolve conflicts or understand it as being something natural. None of the children felt that television violence affected them. They did not justify violence and were not insensitive to violent content.

Sex and TV

The children's opinions suggested they know how to distinguish between sex and love. In general, the boys did not support using sex on TV to sell products, while the girls condemned the relationship between sex and male chauvinism, as found in advertisements for cars, detergents and colognes. All the children disliked sexual content that pops up unrequested on the internet.

Although most of the children said they had learnt about sex from television, they did not consider it an important source of such information. They complained there was a lot of sex on TV but that it almost never provided information or helped them answer their questions. This may explain the interest they had in the radio programmes (*En tu casa o en la mía*) and television shows (*Me lo dices o me lo cuentas*) presented by sex expert Lorena Berdún. The acceptance of these programmes and the opinions the children expressed could be interpreted as an indication that they would like there to be TV shows that discussed sex but which were not 'educational'. They would accept programmes that were entertaining and informative and that included discussions in which they could participate.

When it comes to information about sex, children today are

in situations very similar to those experienced by other generations. Their friends continue to be the most important reference point, and they do not like to talk about sex with their parents. They said they would only go to their parents if there was a serious problem. They saw sex as an important part of their private lives and the process of becoming independent from their parents.

The results of the study also found that television did not seem to be the most important vehicle of information for learning about sex, and that the family partly guides their interpretations about the sexual content that appears on TV.

Finally, a possible and highly positive collaboration could be forged between the media and schools. Television, and radio, too, could form the bases of discussions about sex that could then be developed at school. However, for this type of initiative to work, it would be necessary to train teachers and guide them in how to discuss these issues in a way that was free of the paternalism and control with which schools usually try to suggest to children how TV content should be interpreted.

Media Education

The knowledge the children demonstrated about the way television works, fruit of their experience as viewers and the guidelines for interpreting television content that they have received from their environment, does not mean it is not necessary to develop media education plans addressed at this age group.

Such a plan would have three main bases:

- a) The use of television content as a possible tool for generating discussions that could be developed in the classroom.
- b) The encouragement, on the part of the primary or high school, for children to create their own media content throughout their school years: infotainment shows, radio programmes, websites, photo exhibitions, proposals for new TV shows, series scripts.
- c) The adaptation of classroom work on media education to meet the heterogeneity of the students and particularly the high percentage of foreign students.

However, for these goals to be truly viable, it would be necessary to also work on the following aspects at the same time:

- Teacher training that focused on the need to let children express their interpretations about television content without trying to impose an adult's interpretation.
- The creation of stimuli outside the school so children could get interested in media production, e.g., holding school awards.
- The creation of time on the curriculum that would allow schools to give the reading hours needed to develop media education.
- The promotion of the collaboration needed with the public, local media and a number of publishing companies so that some of the best products, or suggested products, which the children generate each school year could become real programmes and publications.

Their proposals could help form the basis of television and radio programming and create new journalistic publications addressed at this age group. The children in the study said they wanted programmes addressed at them and in which they could take part.

The Activity of the CAC

I believe the children's opinions reinforce the need to battle reality shows and other 'junk TV'. Even though the study results suggested that the things that appear on such programmes were not important to children in terms of being a model for behaviour, it is also true that the time they take up could be used for programmes which demonstrate a basic respect for people and an appropriate use of language. All of us, children and adults alike, deserve better-quality entertainment and it is important that regulatory organizations act to make TV stations start to think about different ways of filling programming schedules.

The CAC must continue to ensure that successful TV series are mindful of the language they use, as a fiction show's attraction is not based on the fact that it uses one type of language or another, but on the story told. Therefore, the supposed populist touch that some scriptwriters try to give their products by using 'gutter' language should be one of the aspects to correct when it comes to designing new fiction shows.

The CAC should also continue to monitor the violent content that appears onscreen. The children were clear

about the criteria they use to assess violence. They did not mind it when it was part of a fantasy, when the aim was to take a humorous approach to social criticism or when it was represented in the form of cartoons. On the other hand, they were affected by violence that related to situations that could happen or has happened in real life and were very aware of the physical and emotional suffering of the victims.

Their comments pointed towards another type of violent content that has often caused controversy: the violence young people see every day on the news. Having seen this, it could be a good idea to promote news programmes aimed at children that could help them move from information to awareness-raising, and from this to possible social participation.

The results of this study also suggest the need to maintain and even increase control over TV advertising. The children's answers clearly showed the importance of regulating advertisements that use women's bodies to sell products or sexist ads (which are still very abundant) where, for example, a woman is still surprised when a man decides to wash the dishes.

The young people's opinions also suggest another function the CAC could assume: that of promoting institutional advertisements. Contrary to what one might imagine, the participants reacted positively to these types of ads, as long as they addressed a problem or concern they could relate to. Institutional ads that used humour rather than provocation, and prevention rather than prohibition and which, in particular, took a young person's point of view, could have an important place on TV.

The CAC could also ask the different TV stations to bring their schedules forward. Families have adopted a routine of going to bed when the nightly film or TV series has finished and this is difficult to change. However, if all the TV stations brought their prime-time viewing schedules forward, families would be able to go to bed earlier, with the subsequent improvement that getting a good night's sleep would have on individual wellbeing and on the school and work performance of society.

Finally, the study results also showed the importance of actions on the part of the CAC that aim to find possible solutions to the problem presented by the danger of videogame addiction and the sex content that appears on the internet unprompted by the user. From this information,

we can see that the CAC should continue with its work of informing families about the need to control their children's exposure to the media and, more specifically, limiting the number of hours they spend playing videogames. It should also continue to insist on the need for videogames to be marketed with clear warnings about the danger of addiction, as basic user information.

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