Violence, Values, and the Electronic Media Environment: Implications for Marketing Communication

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Abstract:
This paper originated as a contribution to informed debate on public policy issues surrounding a review of New Zealand broadcasting policy. The issue, however, has implications well beyond the New Zealand market. Public debate on broadcasting has frequently centered on calls to improve a) the quality of programming overall, b) improve children's programming in particular, and c) to ban advertising in children's television programmes. This narrow focus ignores the impact of the wider viewing environment. A major focus of this paper is on the potential detrimental effects on children of exposure to violence and negative values in the electronic media environment. We review the literature relating to this; examine the presumed linkages between exposure to violence and the propensity for children to act aggressively; then report on the findings of a study of parental perceptions regarding the impact of violence and of negative values on their children. We conclude with a discussion of the role of marketing communication in this environment.

Introduction

A New Zealand Government review of broadcasting policy, including a proposed ban on advertising around children's television programmes (see Labour Party, 1999:5) was announced in late 1999. The proposed ban appears to be underpinned by the notion that the advertising of food products is directly linked to unhealthy dietary habits and nutrition problems among children. The release of the draft policy led to the setting out of the issues relating to children directed advertising and a research agenda designed to better inform public policy (see Eagle and de Bruin, 2000). In line with this research program, a survey of the parents / guardians of children in one high socio-economic level and one high socio-economic level metropolitan primary school was undertaken. The survey focused on parental perceptions of a range of issues regarding advertising directed at children, preferences for modes of advertising regulation and perceptions of the wider viewing environment to which their children were exposed. An unexpected outcome of this study was the level of parental concern regarding perceived 'unacceptable' levels of violence and the lack of positive values in television, videos and videogames. These concerns were far stronger than concerns regarding the impact of advertising on the children. This finding was the impetus for this paper.

The intention of this paper is to help inform debate on public policy issues regarding how society should identify and address any potential detrimental effects from electronic media. We firstly review the literature regarding the link between exposure to violence and the propensity for children to act aggressively. We then discuss the role of marketing communication in this environment – what impact does violent programming content have on the reception of commercials and what social role, if any, should commercial broadcasting fulfill? Following on from this, we report on parental perceptions regarding the impact of violence and of negative values on their children.

What is Violence?
Edgar (1977) notes the complexity of the term violence and the variety of 'labels' attached to it. She draws on earlier classifications (Hartogs & Artzt, 1970) to propose three categories:
- organized violence e.g., wars / 'responsible organized violence'

- spontaneous violence: reactive, compensatory, making up for frustrations (includes murder and acts of mayhem)
- pathological violence committed by the physically or mentally ill.

The mass media is most often accused of responsibility for contributing substantially to increases in occurrences in the second category, and, increasingly for providing the 'trigger' for the third. What is unclear is whether there is a *causal* relationship between television violence and anti-social behaviour. Does the portrayal of electronic heroes who, even in the interest of 'right', solve their problems by violence have either an immediate or a sleeper effect (a long-term, cumulative subconscious impact) in normalizing violence and making it 'acceptable' behaviour?

The Presumed Link Between Exposure to Violence and Violent Behaviour
Violence is not new. Children have been exposed to violence in the name of entertainment since well before television (recall Ali Baba and the 40 thieves murdered with boiling oil, Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother eaten by the wolf and what the witch might have had in mind for Hansel and Gretel). Currently, the greater focus on violence stems from both the volume and graphic detail possible in modern electronic media which allows violence to be presented with considerably more explicit detail and realism than ever before. Generally, the 'victim' does not bounce back. Critics appear to suggest that yet another societal problem will be removed through the imposition of bans, i.e. reduce or eliminate violent acts in the media and violence in the community will correspondingly diminish.

The possible impact on society, and on children in particular, as a result of exposure to violence in the media has been thrown into sharp focus by a number of issues. These include a spate of killings of children by children within (American) schools and numerous reported instances of aggressive acts among children in many countries. (one of the most publicized recent events being the 1999 killing of 13 people by two students at Columbine High School in America). Social commentators appear to assume that there is a direct causal link between exposure to violence in media such as television and a rise in violence within society in general.

Advocates of the direct linkage suggest that there are very real parallels with the health impact of tobacco and call for an acknowledgment of the harm exposure to violence may do to children. Albiniak & McConnell (1998) cite US political reports blaming television specifically and directly for 10% of youth violence. Grossman (1999) suggests that the media are stonewalling and that ultimately, financial penalties may be the only means of ensuring that television networks and videogame promoters face their responsibilities. Arguing that while some form of regulation, if not actual censorship appears warranted, Bayles (1993) acknowledges that the media, and particularly new electronic forms are becoming harder to monitor let alone regulate. Opponents of calls for greater control of media content suggest that these moves would be nothing more than attempts at unwarranted censorship. Bayles (1993:20) cites Disney's president as dismissing any harmful effects with the suggestion that any impact is probably positive, providing a release of built up tension. Hepburn (1997) refutes this suggestion, pointing to the mounting body of social-scientific evidence of *negative* effects. A limitation in this growing body of evidence however, should be conceded. Where empirical data are presented in studies, it does not discriminate between potential influences, appearing to regard "all contributory factors as equally causal" (Edgar, 1977:17). It should be recognized that a search for a simple solution based on an assumed direct cause and effect link between exposure and a propensity towards violent acts may not take into account range of wider family, cultural and socio-economic factors (see, e.g. Males, 1997).

Edgar (1977) is critical of many early (1960s) psychiatric reconstruction studies that claim direct links between exposure to violence and violent behaviour. She suggests that many of these early studies are biased and based on the selection of data to support the pre-existing theory that "the relentless commercialization and the surfeit of brutality, violence and sadism have made a profound impression on susceptible young people" (Wertham, 1962: 309). Techniques such as content analysis are also criticized by Edgar who suggests that classic drama such as Hamlet may achieve similar 'violent act' counts as modern works but that crude counts do not allow the evaluation of the context in which the acts are presented. Early experimental studies, e.g. Bandura et al. 1963, indicated that exposure to filmed aggression heightens aggressive reactions in young children, due in part to children imitating what they have seen. Berkowitz (1964) supports these findings, but tempers this by suggesting that, while filmed violence is potentially dangerous, the effects are likely to be short lived. Hough & Erwin (1997) review a number of more recent studies, noting the conclusion that long term increases in aggression among boys *is* evident as a result of prolonged exposure to violence.

Edgar suggests that children can evaluate violence within the context of the story and the film genre. She cites (1977:19) studies of children who viewed a war film and who provided such comments as "things happened – were expected", "died to save country". Children's comments regarding other films indicated that violence "for no reason" was more unpleasant and upsetting. It appears that the context, not just the nature or extent of it, appears to be important. Edgar suggests (1977:213), "as long as the rules of a western, crime film or war film are complied with, violence is acceptable and understood". Cantor & Nathanson (1997) warn that children, especially boys, may be attracted to violent programmes precisely *because* parents attempt to restrict access (a 'forbidden fruit hypothesis'). Their review of extant research indicates that an interest in vicarious participation in violence by males peaks during adolescence. Younger children may be attracted both as an assertion of their independence and as a means of testing their ability to 'handle' frightening content.

While evidence appears to be growing of the negative impact of exposure to violence, the impact of *cartoon* violence specifically is less clear. Its special character is acknowledged by the Broadcasting Standards Authority in their Free-to-air television programme code's Introduction to 'Portrayal of Violence': "Cartoons often contain a level of violence which would not be acceptable in real life … cartoons are usually recognized by children, at least older children, as being depictions of the unreal, although (clause) V.18 states cartoons must avoid excessive violence" (Broadcasting Standards Authority, 2000). Sweet & Singh (1994) note that the level of violence in prime time television is about 5 violent acts per hour, whereas in children's cartoons it is 20 – 25 violent acts per hour. The University of Texas (1999) reports that assaults by children that have been blamed on copying cartoons have led to 'Mighty Morphin Power Rangers' among other cartoon series being taken off air in several countries.

More recently, Groves (1997:81), in a review of a range of empirical studies from the mid 1980s to mid 1990s, suggests that violence on television (in any form, be it cartoons, 'real' programmes or news broadcasts) is often disconnected from real consequences. She notes that, while "heroes may have good values, and the message may be pro-social, it is conveyed in ways that make violence seem justified". In addition, if violence is funny, it may also be seen as justified. As such, Groves suggests that continued exposure to violence results in desensitization, a loss of ability to empathize with victims, and an altered perception of

reality. This view is supported by Osofsky & Osofsky (1998:22) who, drawing on similar reviews of empirical studies to Groves, warn that sensationalizing and glorifying violence results in a numbing desensitization, with youth especially identifying more with perpetrators than with victims. They further caution that "exposure to violence can determine how children process the experiences of their lives, how they behave in various circumstances and how they react to provocation".

The debate is further complicated when electronic games are considered. Funk et al. (1999) cite increasing calls for methods of rating electronic games to reflect the presence of violent content. In calling for one single comprehensive rating system across television, videotapes and videogames, they stress that the debate needs to be widened as the boundaries between the various media blur. Violence, sex and language would all be included in this rating system, with a common set of descriptors across the media forms. Those providing the ratings are seen as being autonomous, with decisions informed by both research and consumer perceptions.

Advertising in Violent Programmes and the Social Role of Television
While television can spark curiosity and open up distant worlds, Sweet & Singh (1994:2) suggest "violence is a major course in TV's curriculum". Marketers may place advertisements in high-violence programmes providing that the programmes achieve high / cost-efficient ratings against their target groups. Should marketers be concerned that their revenue helps fund the purchase of these programmes? Critics suggest marketers may have a moral duty to help project positive rather than negative values and, at the very least, to do no harm. Few marketers would however, support such a role. Nevertheless, research suggests that there may be some very pragmatic reasons for reconsidering placement of advertisements within a violent environment. Prasad and Smith (1994) found that advertisements screened in high-violence programmes achieved significantly less favourable reported attitudes towards the advertisement and the advertised brand than when the same commercial was used in a low-violence environment. Thus, high audience ratings in violent television programmes may actually achieve low communication effectiveness.

There is a perceived conflict between the perception of television as a tool for carrying advertising messages and thus maximizing revenue for the television channels and the role of the medium in achieving wider social objectives, including education of children. What then is the role of the media – particularly television – and of marketers in projecting positive or 'ideal' role models for society? In making a plea for what television could be, Palmer (1988) suggests that it can be a cost-efficient educational tool, achieving measurable educational outcomes. Television's main benefits are that it is non-threatening, non-punitive and can organize and present information clearly, in ways that are dependent neither on reading skills nor on ability. Kalin (1997:2) stresses that everything on television is educating in the broadest sense of the word – 'after all, if commercials teach, is there any reason to believe that television programmes do not?"

While some may argue that a social role model should be required of the television stations, the distinction must be made between publicly owned and privately owned stations. Publicly owned stations can be deemed to have specific public service obligations and social goals. The same cannot be said for private operators. As Young (1990:20) aptly points out, commercial broadcasting operates on a very simple principle. "The product is the audience, the buyer is the advertiser and the programme acts as bait to attract viewers" ... "the

commercial broadcaster is in the business of selling audiences to advertisers".   Taxpayer funded broadcasting, by contrast, affords greater latitude to pursue a mix of profit making commercial imperatives and socially desirable goals.

The jury remains out on issues such as:
- What impact is marketing communication seen to have on wider issues such as promoting 'values'?
- What ethical responsibilities, if any, do marketers have to ensure that the environment in which their persuasive communications appear does no harm to a group in society deemed to be in need of greater 'protection' than other groups?

The Wild, Wild Web

Although television advertising has been the primary focus of the current government review, there is also considerable debate regarding whether and how Internet advertising – and, indeed, Internet content itself can be regulated.   Within this are concerns regarding how children in particular can be protected from 'Net Nasties' (for discussion of this in an international context see, for example Hertzel, 2000; Siebert, 1999; Baig, 1999, Miller, 1999). This debate also raises questions relating to the degree of parental control and supervision of their children, together with products that are available commercially to aid parents to block access to web sites considered unsuitable.

In New Zealand, both the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA, 2000a & b) and specific sectors of the marketing communications industry such as the Direct Marketing Association (DMA, 2000) are currently canvassing the views of their members on methods and potential scope of self-regulation of Internet advertising.   There has been no opportunity however, for the public to provide input into the industry discussion documents and proposed codes of practice under discussion by industry members.   More open discussion of these issues may help build public confidence in the industry's ability to effectively self regulate.   While a detailed analysis of this area is beyond the scope of this paper, the following section of the paper reports the findings of a pilot study designed to close the information gap in a second area where there has been a paucity of public input in this country.   It addresses the options available and preferences of parents / caregivers regarding advertising content, programme quality and levels of violence and regulatory mechanisms.

The Pilot Study

The research objectives of the study, relevant to this paper, were to determine:
- whether violence in electronic media, i.e. television programmes, videotaped programmes and electronic games, is seen as a major problem by parents / caregivers
- what specific concerns parents / caregivers have with violence in individual forms of electronic media
- whether parents / caregivers' perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' television programmes reflected their concerns regarding violence in the media
- what influence advertising, relative to other possible influences, was seen as having on children wanting products
- whether concerns regarding fads such as toys / collectibles linked to television programmes or movies are seen as a major concern to parents / caregivers.

Two primary schools in Metropolitan Auckland were selected for the pilot survey of parents/primary caregivers. The first school was a 'decile 7' school[1]. Parents of the children attending could be classified as being, on average, of mid socio-economic status. The second school was a decile 10. Parents thus are representative of the highest socio-economic levels. The probability of their involvement in industry and in political decision-making and influencing process is high. With the agreement of the school Trust Boards and the support of the Principals, a questionnaire together with a reply paid envelope, was enclosed with the school newsletters to parents. A covering letter from the school Principals explaining the origin, purpose and intention of the survey was also attached. Questionnaires were sent out to 180 households from the decile 7 school in April 2000. 55 were returned giving a response rate of 31%. Questionnaires were sent out in September 2000 to 420 households from the decile 10 school. 105 were returned, yielding a 25% response rate.

Results of the Study
The growing concern with levels of violence in media to which children are exposed was tested via three direct questions relating to television, videotapes and interactive videogames. 78% of decile 7 and 67% of decile 10 respondents indicated that violence in programmes that may be watched by children was a major concern. Their principal concerns are summarised in Table 1 below. The major concern for both groups of respondents was that violence in any form is wrong and that continued exposure to it via media such as television, both in news and in programmes normalises it, and possibly desensitises people ("they think it does not hurt"!). 17% of decile 7 and 6% of decile 10 respondents indicated that television programmes containing "exciting" / "heroic" violent scenes promoted the acting out of these violent actions, which was potentially dangerous for children. 11% of decile 7 and 9% of decile 10 respondents indicated that their children were unable to distinguish between programmes and reality and that children appeared to accept violence as 'normal". 7% of decile 7 respondents and 2% of decile 100 respondents objected to violence "even in cartoons".

Table 1: Concerns regarding the amount of violence in television programmes

Concern details	% Decile 7	% Decile 10
violence in any form is wrong / continued exposure to violence normalises it / desensitises children	43	49
promotes acting out of violent scenes from programmes	17	6
children cannot distinguish between programme and reality	11	9
violence even in cartoons is wrong	7	2
violence is frightening for children	-	1
No concerns listed / no response	22	33
Total	100	100

Concerns regarding violence in videotapes were not as high, with only 35% of decile 7 and 29% of decile 10 respondents indicating concerns. A number who did not have specific concerns commented that this was because they were careful regarding what videotapes their children watched. Of those who did have concerns, comments were similar to those for television violence, as shown in Table 2 below. An additional concern cited by respondents was that the title / cover graphics of hired videotapes did not give sufficient clues to the

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[1] Schools in New Zealand are classified from deciles 1 –10, with decile 1 associated with the lowest socio-economic group and 10 the highest.

content - and that stopping a tape part way through because it was unsuitable for children caused "considerable tension". Further, some respondents felt that they had no control over what children watched in the homes of their friends, and that there was peer pressure to watch what their friends had seen.

Table 2: Concerns regarding the amount of violence in videotapes

Concern details	% Decile 7	% Decile 10
violence in any form is wrong - normalises it when continually seeing it	9	8
promotes acting out of violence	7	-
children think everything can be solved by fighting	4	11
titles do not give a clue as to content	9	4
no control over what they watch at their friends' homes	6	6
no concerns as carefully screen what videos children watch	38	45
no response	27	26
Total	100	100

52% of decile 7 respondents and 46% of decile 10 respondents had concerns regarding violence in videogames. Of those that did not have concerns, a number indicated that this was because they were careful regarding what games children purchased to play.

Of those who did cite concerns, Table 3 shows that the concerns were similar to those given for videotapes - with one interesting addition. 7% of decile 7 and 4% of decile 10 respondents suggested that playing with violent videogames made their children "angry and violent themselves". This is consistent with the evidence in the literature cited earlier (e.g. Bayles, 1993). An additional comment made by several parents was that it was questionable as to whether children could distinguish the 'glamorized / stylized' violence from reality. One parent noted that "as a female, I cannot understand boys love of violent games and movies", perhaps reflecting the 'forbidden fruit' hypothesis cited earlier (Cantor & Nathanson, 1997).

Table 3: Concerns regarding the amount of violence in interactive videogames

Concern details	% Decile 7	% Decile 10
violence in any form is wrong - children accept it as normal	26	17
promotes acting out of violent scenes	9	14
makes children angry and violent themselves	7	4
too graphic - scary	4	5
children not supervised when playing games at friends' homes	6	3
cover graphics and title do not give clues as to violence levels	-	3
no concerns as games are controlled	23	29
no concerns cited / no response	25	25
Total	100	100

Parents were then asked to nominate their top three choices of the best television programmes for children to watch, and to provide up to three reasons for making these nominations. There was a strong preference for educational and informative programmes for children to watch, particularly those which are non-violent and which teach positive values. These programmes included nature programmes, family movies and a locally produced children's activity programme "What Now". This programme is some two hours in duration, running from 3.30 - 5.30pm. It is comprised partially of locally produced material, featuring visits to schools or

interactions between the show's regular presenters and children in a number of public venues. These 'local' components are interspersed between a series of cartoons, several of which feature in the nominations for worst programme.

Table 4: Reasons for Nominating Three Best Television Programmes

Reason	Nominated as First Reason		Nominated as Second Reason		Nominated as Third Reason	
	Decile 7 %	Decile 10 %	Decile 7 %	Decile 10 %	Decile 7 %	Decile 10 %
Educational / informative	50	38	12	14	2	2
Suitable for children to watch	16	16	4	16	2	3
Shows them the real world	8	4	4	7	6	7
Teaches positive values	6	5	18	5	10	2
Children like the programme	4	12	16	7	14	7
Non violent	2	3	8	5	-	-
No response / no programmes nominated	14	22	38	46	66	79
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Parents were then asked to nominate up to three programmes that they judged as being the worst for their children to watch, and to then give reasons for their nominations. Parents were very definite in their dislike of specific programmes and in providing reasons for this dislike. The survey occurred at a time that "collectibles" were receiving an increasing amount of negative media commentary - particularly the Pokemon "fad". Several schools had banned Pokemon material in their grounds. Somewhat surprisingly therefore, "Pokemon" was not the designated "worst" programme - that distinction went to "The Simpsons". Reasons included that it portrayed negative values and bad behaviour or "subversive behaviour". Overall, the portrayal of negative values - or failure to portray positive values was the major reason given for nominating programmes in the "worst" category. This was closely followed by concerns regarding violent content and the portrayal of bad behaviour. As previously noted, 'What Now' was nominated as one of the best children's programmes. Several of the cartoons contained within it, such as "Cow & Chicken", "I am Weasel", "Digemon" and "Hey Arnold" were nominated among the worst programmes for children. Several comments from respondents highlighted concerns regarding what was seen as the "unnecessary" inclusion of "violent" and negative cartoons within the overall programme.

Table 5: Reasons for Nominating Three Worst Television Programmes

Reason	Nominated as First Reason		Nominated as Second Reason		Nominated as Third Reason	
	Decile 7 %	Decile 10 %	Decile 7 %	Decile 10 %	Decile 7 %	Decile 10 %
Does not show positive values	28	33	26	12	12	2
Violent	20	18	8	6	2	-
Portrays bad behaviour	16	1	14	9	8	8
Not suitable for children	12	5	8	6	2	2
Addictive	8	-	-	1	-	-
Outlandish/scary /causes sleeping problems	4	2	12	-	8	1
Too complex	-	-	2	-	4	1
Boring / silly	-	1	4	-	4	-
No response / no programmes nominated	12	40	26	66	60	86
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Parent's perceptions of the degree of influence of advertising in children's programmes and other programmes were compared to their perceptions of the degree of influence of other children (school friends etc) and siblings. A five-point scale was used, with 1 = not influenced at all, 3 = neutral and 5 = influenced considerably. The results in Table 6 below suggest that advertising in children's programmes was not seen as being an overwhelming influence on children in terms of their wanting products (mean 3.3 for decile 7 and 3.4 for decile 10, compared to 3.7 and 4.0 respectively for other children). A t-test was conducted, using a null hypothesis of 3 (neutral). As can be seen, this null hypothesis can be rejected for all statements except a) and d) for the decile 7 group. Those statements that are not neutral are marked with an asterisk in Table 6. There were no significant differences in the means between the two decile groups.

Table 6: Degree of Influence on Children Wanting Products (where 1 = not influenced at all, 3 = neutral and 5 = influenced considerably)

Potential influence source	Decile 7		Decile 10	
	Mean	Std dev	Mean	Std dev
a) Advertising in children's programmes	3.3	1.3	3.4*	1.1
b) Advertising in other (e.g. family and adult 'prime time') programmes	2.7*	1.0	2.7*	1.0
c) Other children (school friends etc)	3.7*	1.2	4.0*	0.9
d) Their siblings (brothers and sisters), cousins, whanau etc	3.3	1.3	3.6*	1.2

*denotes that the null hypothesis of 3 (neutral) can be rejected at the .025 (2-tail) level of significance

Conclusion

The literature surveyed in this paper shows that there is no consensus on the existence of a conclusive link between violence portrayed in the electronic media and violent behaviour. Similarly it is not clear that children have the ability to evaluate violence in the story, film, interactive game and cartoon contexts, nor is it clear as to how they process this media violence and relate it to their life experiences. Nevertheless as a normative conclusion and supported by the empirical evidence of parental preferences in our pilot study, it may be argued that greater control and monitoring of violence in electronic media content is desirable.

Our indicative study lends support to the thesis that parents share many common concerns regarding quality of media used by their children and, in particular, regarding the impact of exposure to violence on their children. In reviewing children's advertising issues, policy makers and responsible advertising industry groups should consider the quality of television programming as a primary source of concern for parents. Mounting disquiet, particularly from America, indicates that marketers could face future backlashes against advertising in violent programmes and therefore should take parental concerns seriously.

The reception of marketing communications is affected by the context – the programming environment. Even if marketers have no ethical responsibility to ensure that their persuasive communications do no harm, this study supports the view that interesting, entertaining and informative programmes, which avoid violence, negative values and anti-social behaviour, are likely to be of greatest value to the advertiser because in a context of parental control of their children's viewing time, such programmes are most preferred by parents and therefore most likely to be watched.

Whilst this pilot study has provided policy makers with some empirical evidence of how families perceive their children's viewing environment, and of some issues that are of genuine concern to parents, the results are limited by the sample size. Future research will focus on replicating and extending the findings using a larger sample and a wider cross-section of socio-economic groups.

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