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No. 6**Violence on Television**

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The National Committee on Violence (NCV) has been asked to examine 'the impact of the mass media on the incidence of violence' as part of its broad-ranging terms of reference. The Committee's task is one that potentially overlaps with an Inquiry by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) into Television Violence.

To avoid duplication of effort, and to maximise the resources available to examine this most difficult and contentious area, the NCV and ABT have collaborated closely in a number of activities, including the production of this issue of Violence Today.

Of all the aspects of violence considered by the NCV, the issue most frequently raised in submissions from the general public was that of violence and the media. Research commissioned by the ABT also highlights the concern felt by many Australians about the impact of televised violence upon the community. As the authors of this paper indicate, many people believe that violence on the screen is to some extent responsible for a perceived increase in actual violence. But they also remind us that violence existed long before the advent of the mass media and that it would be misleading to regard the media 'as the root of violent behaviour'.

For policy-makers, the media, and the community, the current work of the ABT and NCV promises to provide certain benchmarks regarding the media portrayal of violence in contemporary Australian society.

Duncan Chappell
Chair
National Committee on Violence

In Brisbane on 29 June this year, a man killed his two-year-old daughter and a policeman and injured five other people, including his de facto wife, before committing suicide.

Media coverage of this event raises many of the issues pertinent to debate about violence on television. These include the selection and presentation of newsworthy events—for example, the amount of time allocated to an item, verbal and visual detail and the repetition of strong visuals—and also the possible invasion of privacy, the suitability of such visually detailed material being screened at a time when children are likely to be watching and whether or not graphic material should be prefaced by a warning to viewers.

Two weeks after the event the *Sunday Sun* ran the following story in a front page report headlined 'TV Violence Sets Off Killer' and 'Violent Video Role in Shooting Rampage':

A man who killed his baby daughter and a policeman before taking his own life had continually replayed a violent TV segment just before his violent rampage began. Mr X, 26, of . . . , also stabbed his de facto wife Ms Y, 23, as she tried to protect the couple's eight month old son . . . during the frenzied knife and gun attack on June 29. In an exclusive interview with the *Sunday Sun* from her hospital bed, Ms Y said: 'The thing that got to me was that he was watching *Tour of Duty* (the Vietnam war drama) on the video and played one part over and over again. It was a scene with all this shooting—a whole pile of army men out shooting. I

told him to turn it off, but he just kept rewinding it and playing it'. In the following few minutes, the . . . bloodbath began.

(Note: The names in this quote have been deleted in the interests of privacy)

The emphasis in this article is on the link between violence depicted on television for entertainment and the occurrence of real violence in Australian society, and not on other factors such as the physical violence which was frequently experienced by Ms Y at the hands of her de facto prior to the shootings.

Such reportage focuses concern in the community on the causes of violence, the role and influence of television in Australian society generally, and its portrayal of violence in particular. A UNESCO Symposium on the impact of violence in the mass media, which was held as long ago as 1970, declared:

Violence existed before the mass media. Although the media should not be absolved from their responsibilities, it would be misleading to regard them as the roots of violent behaviour. These are more likely to be found in the frustration engendered by such factors as inequality, social injustice, overcrowding, urbanization and so on.

However, many people believe that violence on the screen is to some extent responsible for a perceived increase in real violence.

If violence in entertainment programs was implicitly in the dock in the *Sunday Sun* article, television news coverage of the same event received criticism in the 'media monitor' section of the *Catholic Leader* for allowing the style of

fictional violence to colour its presentation:

The scenes on Brisbane television news . . . could have come straight from the most violent American television cop shows . . . The television cameras were there before the last shot was fired, and viewers were shown shocking scenes, including close-ups of bloodied faces and bodies, bodies on stretchers, frenzied ambulance scenes, police and residents racing for cover from the sniper, and police with rifles drawn and ready to shoot the gunman down.

The following facts about the television news coverage were noted critically by the *Catholic Leader*: both the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the commercial channels covered the story, all using strong visual material. The ABC item ran for just over two minutes in length while the commercial channels all ran 'what was for them a long story', from four and a half to five minutes. One channel also repeated the footage later in the news bulletin during a two-minute story on armoured vests for police. Finally, it was observed that only one channel issued a warning that the report might be unsettling for some people.

The *Catholic Leader* emphasised three scenes in particular as having a lasting impact:

A close-up of medical officers trying to save the shot policeman with vigorous pumping of the chest to resuscitate the heart as he was wheeled into hospital on a stretcher; the body of a shot little girl being transferred from one policeman to another; and a policeman running with a rescued, crying baby under one arm and with a pistol in his other hand.

The article acknowledged that the pictures were 'dramatic' and the story 'hot news', but it questioned the taste and sensitivity in showing such violent visuals, as 'all the details of the story could have been published without the graphic pictures, and the public's right to information would have been served'. The *Catholic Leader* concluded that 'it is not so much the words that worry viewers—and parents of young children in particular—as the pictures. Perhaps it is timely for television news producers to reassess their attitude

to the absolute need for, or dependency on, pictures'.

On the one hand it may be argued, as the British Broadcasting Corporation (1987) does, that in certain instances visuals 'should and will shock viewers' because this sense of shock is an integral part of fully comprehending what has happened. On the other hand, a too vivid portrayal can be distressing in itself and it may also 'lead to revulsion rather than the communication of any truth about the incident portrayed' (Broadcasting Standards Council 1989). It is said that violence on the news has more impact than dramatised depictions precisely because it is real and that television news reportage magnifies, rather than mirrors, people's perceptions about the amount of violence in the world today.

As in literature and drama, the depiction of violence has always been accepted as having a legitimate place in television and cinema films, whether documentary, news or fiction. Equally, however, its inclusion has triggered concern about matters such as the amount of violence presented, the portrayal of violence as essentially glamorous, the cumulative impact of programs with violent themes and scenes, the possibility of imitation, the presentation of violence as an acceptable solution to conflict, the possible desensitisation of viewers, and the particular effects on children.

Events such as Melbourne's Queen and Hoddle Street massacres and the Hungerford massacre in the United Kingdom in 1987, have also served as catalysts for debate about graphic reportage of violent crime and the nature and strength of violence portrayed in television programs. Public concern over this issue has recently resulted in a number of government inquiries, including the Inquiry into Television Violence by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal which was announced in August 1988 by Gareth Evans, the then Minister for Transport and Communications.

Under its terms of reference, this Inquiry is primarily concerned with people's attitudes to the portrayal, presentation and reporting of violence, the most appropriate method of ensuring that proper consideration is given by licensees to the way in which violent material is presented, and whether the Tribunal's powers under the *Broadcasting Act* are adequate in

preventing unacceptable levels of violence in television programs.

As television is freely accessible in the home, it is seen as presenting special problems. With the inception of television in Australia in 1956, the Commonwealth Government decided that films imported for commercial television—and also those local programs not made under the auspices of the stations—should be examined and classified by the Film Censorship Board (FCB) under Television Program Standards (TPS). These Standards were to be determined by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board, a body which was replaced in 1977 by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal.

THE TELEVISION PROGRAM STANDARDS

The Standards were first drafted in 1956 after consultation with the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations and other interested bodies. They include the categories, criteria and transmission time zones to be addressed when commercial television stations are classifying programs. The depiction of violence is a major classification consideration as is the portrayal of sexual matters and also the use of coarse language. Depending on the degree, nature and place of violence in the theme and storyline, violent material may occur across the whole range of television classifications (*see inset*).

The classification system provides consumer advice by grading the material into categories, thereby enabling viewers to select suitable entertainment for themselves and their families. While protecting younger viewers from exposure to material which might disturb them and warning adults of possibly offensive matters, it facilitates adult freedom to view. The exercise of adult rights is, however, generally accepted as carrying certain responsibilities and being subject to a number of constraints for the good of society as a whole.

In its report for 1956, the FCB stated that the Standards closely followed the principles which had operated for many years in the censorship of theatrical films although the classification of television material 'is on a rather stricter basis' in view of the ready access children have to the medium, particularly in the early evening

The classification criteria for violence

G (General Viewing—may be televised at any time) Physical and psychological violence, or assaultive language may not be presented in such a manner as to cause alarm or distress to children. References must be strictly limited to the context or storyline of the program.

PGR (Parental Guidance Recommended—must not be televised between 6 am and 8.30 am or between 4 pm and 7.30 pm on weekdays or between 6 am and 7.30 pm on Saturday and Sunday.) Inexplicit, discreet, stylised representations only, which must be appropriate to the storyline or program context. Overly realistic, bloody or horrific depictions not permitted.

AO (Adults Only—must not be televised between 5 am and noon or between 3 pm and 8.30 pm on weekdays or between 5 am and 8.30 pm on Saturday and Sunday, and weekdays which are school holidays.)

May be realistically depicted if appropriate to the storyline or program context; not unduly bloody or horrific and not presented as desirable in its own right.

NST (Must not be televised at any time)
Explicit gratuitous depictions, unduly bloody or horrific depictions, sexual violence. Programs that incite or encourage crimes of violence, crimes against the person or crimes against property.

News Standards

The Standard known as TPS 5 makes provision for the transmission of news and current affairs programs in G time, provided that care is exercised in the selection and transmission of all sound and visual items.

Licensees are directed under TPS 15 c not to present news material in such a manner as to cause public panic or distress to viewers.

hours. Since 1956 amendments to the Standards have been made in the light of changing community attitudes, developments in broadcasting, amendments to the Act and judgements of the courts; however, the rules governing the classification of violent television material remain largely unchanged. The Television Program Standards apply to commercial stations only, although in practice the Australian Broadcasting Corporation has regard to them. The Special Broadcasting Service is not required to comply with or take account of these Standards.

During the mid 1980s, a combination of factors resulted in a substantial change to the administration of the classification system. The ABT's preclassification powers were limited to children's programs in November 1985; the FCB was required by statute to undertake the additional workload of classifying videotapes and, further, there was failure to reach agreement on a fee payable to the FCB by television licensees. Consequently, in March 1986, the administrative arrangement whereby the FCB classified material on behalf of the commercial television stations ended.

The station licensees are now responsible for the pre-classification of entertainment programs. In practice, each commercial network classifies its own program material, and therefore the appeal process (initially to a single appeals censor and then from November 1971 to the Australian Broadcasting Control Board) has become an internal matter for each network. Although the administrative agents for classification have changed, programs are still classified according to the Television Program Standards. The network classification officers evaluate entertainment programs while the individual news and current affairs personnel follow a system of upwards referral when in doubt about violent news material. During 1988, each of the commercial networks formulated self-regulating guidelines to interpret and amplify the Tribunal's Standards. These guidelines deal, among other things, with the portrayal and presentation of violence.

The Tribunal administers the classification standards by investigating complaints from the public about television programs which have been broadcast, and by spot monitoring of programs which

have drawn an unusual number of complaints from the public or programs which appear to have serious problems in complying with the Standards. At licence renewal inquiries, the Tribunal also scrutinises the practices used by the individual stations to assess the suitability of violent footage for transmission.

COMMUNITY ATTITUDES TO VIOLENCE ON TELEVISION

In assessing community response to the current system of classifying violent material, the Inquiry into Television Violence has commissioned research on community perceptions; has called for submissions from the public; and held background discussions with members of the television industry and experts in the field.

Debate on the links between violence on the screen and development of aggressive disposition or behaviour is extensive, but the Inquiry was aware that consensus on the relationship is never likely to be reached as the nature of the problem is not amenable to direct proof. Such studies are designed according to scientific procedure and involve the testing of an hypothesis which is confirmed or rejected according to predetermined criteria. The conclusion of such research, therefore, can only point to a balance of probabilities in a particular direction (Research Branch, ABT 1985).

Consequently, the Inquiry commissioned the Public Policy Research Centre and its affiliate company Newspoll to focus the research study on community attitudes and perceptions of violence shown on television. While there is a large body of literature on the relationship between aggressive tendencies and viewing violent programs, material on the public's attitudes to the presentation of violent material is rather small in comparison.

The study was conducted in two parts:

- Qualitative exploration of the range of community views and perceptions. This was carried out via group discussions with a broad cross-section of the community

Quantitative telephone survey of 2000 individuals aged 13 years and older across urban and rural areas of Australia. The survey aimed to measure the level of concern and the strengths of attitudes in the community at large.

The first task was to define violence in terms of the tastes of the television audience. The importance of the viewer's perspective on televised violence has been advocated by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (Gunter 1988). It was therefore felt that by forming a definition based on audience perceptions the Inquiry would be given useful information on which to base recommendations for the proper consideration of the portrayal, presentation and reporting of violence on television.

The qualitative stage of the Tribunal's research held discussions on particular segments of television. These segments tapped a wide range of material including acts of aggression, implied violence, aftermath of violence, accidents and verbal aggression. A number of factors were identified which influence a viewer's perception of the intensity of violence.

The single most important factor for the majority of people was whether the subject matter was about real life. News and realistic drama were among the programs considered most violent. The closer the violent episodes approached everyday reality (temporally and/or geographically) the more violent material was judged to be. Identification with the victim appeared to heighten the perceptions of the incident's intensity. For example, the viewing of a realistic depiction of rape was less likely to be considered acceptable viewing by an audience of young females. As one male participant commented 'if that had been a rape scene inside a men's prison I would find it more disturbing'. Similarly, in a group of elderly citizens a male participant who had served in the second world war found the presentation of two war scenes unacceptable viewing fare.

Other factors which influenced perceptions of violent content were the explicitness of the violent action shown, the amount of harm to the victim, the intention of the person inflicting the violence, justification for the violence and the type of program in which violence appears.

The influence of these contextual features on the acceptability of violent scenes was tested in a number of attitude items. It was found that both identification and realism were suggested to influence perceptions strongly, as 65 per cent of people agreed that the violence which the viewer perceives as most upsetting is the kind of violence that could happen to them. Teenagers showed particularly strong agreement on this item (78 per cent). Program type appeared to influence perceptions strongly with the majority supporting the view that violence in cartoons and comedy programs is not taken seriously. This had been illustrated at the qualitative stage as one group participant's reaction to Bugs Bunny was 'how can you take a rabbit talking seriously?' Similarly, violence which is important to the story is more acceptable to viewers.

The research on community perceptions of televised violence has, therefore, indicated the breadth of the definition required to cover the range of public perceptions. More importantly, the research indicates violence on television is not a unitary entity as it is influenced by the interaction of viewer characteristics and television content. The viewer's interpretation of the content will mediate perceptions of televised violence.

Given the broad range of television material which viewers may consider as violent it is not surprising that a large sector of the community (60 per cent) feel there is too much violence on television. Concern is not uniform across the community, however (see Figure 1). Those groups most concerned are women, parents, the elderly and people with strong religious convictions. Such clear differences in attitudes to violence on television had been suggested in the qualitative study which revealed five factors which influenced a viewer's opinions on the subject. These were the degree of threat to the viewer and/or his or her family members which the content represents, the ability of the viewer to control television violence, the social propriety of what was shown, the intensity of violence and the level of enjoyment. The importance of any one of these dimensions will vary depending on the viewer characteristics. For example, higher concern in some sectors of the community is not surprising as the greatest area of concern about television violence is its influence on

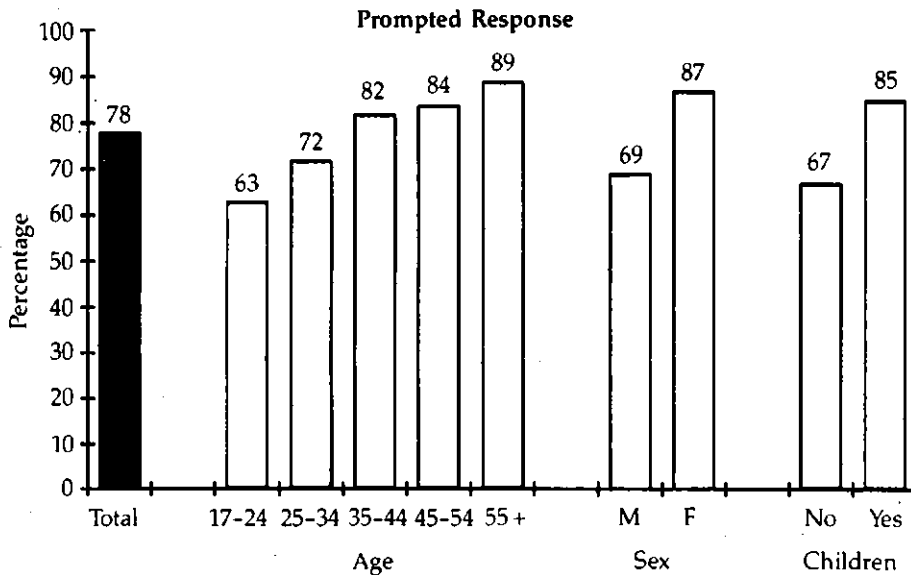
children. Seventy two per cent of those surveyed stated children were those most at risk from television violence. The most commonly reported concerns expressed by adults were that children would become desensitised to violence and therefore more accepting of violence in society, and/or exposure to violence on television would lead to increased acts of aggression. Other perceived effects were emotional disturbances and reality confusion. These concerns reflect a perception of televised violence having both a cumulative influence on children and immediate impact on behaviour.

Consistent with the concern over the cumulative impact of television violence on children was the survey's finding that the majority of people (84 per cent) want more controls on the amount of violence on television. However, the freedom to watch whatever they like remains a strongly held belief. This apparent paradox stems from concerns being related to amount of violence on television perceived to be viewed by others in the community, particularly children.

While there is broad agreement on the extent of violent content the research has highlighted the complex and multi-dimensional nature of viewer perceptions of television violence. The purpose for the portrayal of violence greatly influences acceptability. One half of the adult respondents reported that there were incidents when the violence on television was justified. In particular, the news or reportage of real life violence appears to be a special case in the issue of televised violence: for while it is this type of violence which is reported to have the greatest emotional impact on a viewer, it is also the violence which is viewed as most justifiable. However, it was felt that sometimes the news crews attempted to obtain the most spectacular footage in order to attract viewers. As one group participant expressed it 'the news should report the facts not make a circus out of them'.

The quantitative survey supported this perception of the news with three quarters of the adult respondents agreeing that the news was presented in a spectacular way, and many considered that it lacked good taste. After viewing an item on the 1987 Queen Street (Melbourne) mass murder, participants in the group sessions uniformly condemned the pursuit by television interviewers of a young, distressed woman who had

FIGURE 1 Violence as an Issue



Source: Australian Broadcasting Tribunal 1988/89, Inquiry into Television Violence.

been involved in the Queen Street shooting. The survey findings strongly supported this by revealing that seventy per cent of adults reported distaste for intrusive interviews with accident or tragedy victims. Community attitudes were more evenly split over other presentational aspects of the news which the groups had suggested as gratuitous, such as dead bodies or bloody visuals.

Teenagers' support for the graphic presentation in the news was always higher than adults' acceptance. Further, teenagers were more likely to indicate that the news showed the real world and less likely to perceive the news as being presented in a spectacular way.

Despite some belief in the justification for screening real life violence, six in ten adults thought news showing explicit violent material should only be on late in the evening. This view was given strongest support by those members of the community most concerned about violence on television and is clearly related to concern for children being exposed to violence. So even though there is uniform agreement that children's viewing is the parent's responsibility (96 per cent), it would appear that a large proportion of the community desire changes to the visual presentation of violent material during the early evening time slots.

Generally, people have a low level of awareness and knowledge of regulatory bodies and or the controls on television content. Responsibility for the content of television was most often believed to be that of television stations. Less than one in five adults are aware

the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal plays any role in this regard and six in ten people do not know, any of the current program regulations or controls.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

The current rules governing the portrayal of violence include both the Tribunal's legally based Television Program Standards and their supplementation by self-regulating network guidelines. Ways of addressing community concern about television violence could include changes to either or both of these concurrent systems; for example, tightening of the classification criteria, revocation of TPS 5 (see inset), or stricter interpretation of the existing criteria. Also for consideration are changes to the classification time zones such as a later evening 'watershed' for adult entertainment material and the more graphic news visuals, or graduation of AO material.

The option of graduating AO material had been used irregularly by the FCB. From time to time, it invoked the Standard which permitted the televising of programs considered socially, morally or artistically significant which might otherwise be classified 'Not Suitable For Television'. This Standard indicated that such material could be screened 'at appropriate times, and in appropriate circumstances . . . so long as due warning of the nature of the program is given, where necessary, both in advance publicity and at its commencement'. The FCB classified such programs

'AO' with the provision that they were not to be televised before 9.30 pm. In 1981, however, the ABT advised that any material considered unacceptable for televising at 8.30 pm should henceforth be classified 'Not Suitable For Television' (Office of Film and Literature Classification 1989). An inhouse system of graduated AO categories is currently operated by the Special Broadcasting Service because 'significant numbers of children and teenagers continue watching television past 8.30 pm'. The stronger adult material is therefore scheduled for transmission either after 9.30 or 10.30 pm (Special Broadcasting Service 1989).

Supplementation of the Standards by an industry-wide self-regulating code is another possibility. This could be of assistance in uniform interpretation and implementation of the Standards now that classification is not administered by a single agent on behalf of the commercial networks. This may assist viewers to make informed choices when selecting television programs.

Other possibilities include more readily available advice for viewers on program content and the classification system, and also the wider education of the community on television issues through media education within the schools and public forums sponsored by the television stations.

Debate on what needs to be done is wide-ranging but it is clear that responsibility in this area is threefold: it is that of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal, the television stations and the general public. As the Tribunal's research shows, there is concern in the community about the particular susceptibility of children. While adults are aided in their responsibility to select suitable viewing material for their families by the classification system, some members of the community believe that society cannot confidently rely on parents to adequately monitor children's television viewing. In 1970, in a landmark policy speech on censorship matters, Don Chipp, the then Minister for Customs, stated that the primary responsibility for protecting children rests with parents and guardians and that, ultimately, 'the community simply cannot sit back and expect the Government to protect it'. He recommended 'first, that parents should make every effort to supervise the children's television and to assert basic

responsibility for the moral development of their children; and, second, that parents should encourage greater public expression of both their disapproval of objectionable programs and support for those they like'.

The Final Report of the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry to Deal with the Issues of Community Violence (1989) states, however, that its Committee became aware of 'the overwhelming perception on the part of concerned members of the public of their powerlessness in the face of media organisations', and that 'many members of the public are not aware of the most effective channels for making complaints'. This report confirmed the lack of knowledge in the community about the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal. Viewers need to be made aware of the value of lodging complaints with both the networks and the Tribunal if they are to take up their role as monitors of violence on television.

Comment has been invited by the Inquiry into Television Violence in its Conference Paper about the following measures which may provide the public with better information about the classification system: community service announcements which explain the system along the lines of those already undertaken during 1989 by the Seven Network; the broadcasting of an appropriate message in order to highlight each new time zone (for example, NBN 3 in Newcastle has 'Big Dog' saying goodnight to children at 7.30 pm); a clear visual and auditory classification message at the beginning of every program and the use of warnings—such as 'Violent Content May Offend'—where relevant.

Although the Inquiry's commissioned research reveals that six in ten viewers have turned off or changed channels to avoid violent content, such action is of limited use to viewers if they have already seen the problematic material. Warnings are one way of viewers avoiding such material in the first place. However, the use of warnings is not unanimously endorsed by the community. Script writers David Williamson, Tony Morphett and Michael Brindley told the Inquiry into Television Violence that warnings only encourage children to watch what they may not otherwise have watched (Australian Broadcasting Tribunal 1988/89). Moreover, warnings are not

appropriate for G or PGR classified programs as any material requiring a warning should only be transmitted in AO time, otherwise the warnings might actually serve to increase the strength of violence portrayed in each of the classification categories.

A survey of printed television program guides has been undertaken as part of the Inquiry into Television Violence. Although classification information is included in the advance program schedules made available by the networks, it is not necessarily passed on to consumers in any standardised form in the printed guides. These could be standardised for ease of use, providing the appropriate information for all listed programs plus an explanation of both the classification symbols and time zones were published.

Finally, a series of measures adopted by the British Broadcasting Corporation during 1987 could prove practical within the Australian context. It was decided, for example, that the new guidelines would be 'shorter, crisper and with good graphics in order to make them easier to consult', and that they should be issued to all freelance producers as well as to relevant inhouse staff. Training sessions are held for staff with specially made videos containing examples of decision-making in news, drama and purchased programs in order to 'provoke awareness and discussion of issues of practice and principle'. Seminars for program makers are held on issues such as violence, taste and standards and discussions of programs in which violence appears to be a problem are minuted at length so as to 'create and preserve a body of collected wisdom'. Information about the BBC's evening watershed policy is publicised using printed and on-air announcements. Further, announcements have been made more specific as regards violent content. Particular care is taken to ensure that program promotions are suitable for a family audience when screened prior to the 9 pm watershed and vigilance is 'particularly keen on the part of program purchasers in assessing the quality and quantity of violence in imported programs, especially American crime-based programs'. Care is also taken when scheduling programs not to cluster 'entertainment violence and crime' material.

CONCLUSION

Although the Tribunal's research highlights the wide diversity which exists in the community on issues relating to televised violence, the critical features which influence audience perceptions have been identified. The closeness of the violent depiction to real life events was observed to be the most salient feature in a viewer's perception but a number of other context and intent factors have also been seen to operate. The research clearly documents the community concern about the cumulative impact on children of too much exposure to violent material and it highlights the lack of public knowledge about the current classification system. As one of the major strands of the Tribunal's ministerially directed Inquiry into Television Violence, these findings will be important in a number of ways. They will be important because of their potential input into the drafting of formal and/or informal rules about violent television content if the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal decides to pursue this course of action. They will be of assistance to program makers, purchasers and schedulers in their assessments of what is acceptable viewing material for their target audiences, and finally, these research findings may also provide direction on the type of information needed by viewers who seek to select material with which they feel comfortable.

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