Violent Commercials in Television Programs for Children
(Revised from May 2008)

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The Problem

Violent acts in television programs for children often are depicted as causing little or no permanent damage to persons or property; in other words, these acts are rarely explicit or graphic and often without blood or gore. When sanitized violence is depicted repeatedly, it teaches and validates violent behavior.

In the 1990s, concerns about harm caused to children frequently exposed to televised violence led to public policy changes. To satisfy child advocacy groups and to address flaws in the then-current A.C. Nielsen system, a new ratings system designed to work with a V (for violence) chip, was introduced in 1996. The V-chip reads information “about violence, sexual situations, language content and adult dialogue, encoded in the rated program and blocks programs from the set based upon the rating selected by the parent” (FCC 2000). Armed with this new hardware-software solution, parents could set their televisions to automatically filter programs based on the recommended minimum viewer age, the ratings system, or both.

Although many parents rely on V-chip technology and embedded program ratings to identify unsatisfactory programs, they mistakenly assume this technology now screens their children from violent commercials. Can the additional violence contributed by unfiltered commercials affect children meaningfully? The answer: perhaps. Although the effect of viewing one violent act should be minimal, the effect of repeated exposures to televised violence is cumulative. Furthermore, commercials are ignored in studies of televised violence; for example, both the National Association of Broadcasters’ (NAB) statement on programming principles and the $3.5 million, three-year National Television Violence Study (1996)
omit commercials. To bridge this research lacuna, we assessed the frequency of violent commercials embedded in television programs for children.

**Empirical Study**

Much Saturday morning programming is meant for children; thus, four weeks of such programming on three major networks—Fox, WB, and ABC—was recorded. (Other networks were excluded because they ran adult-oriented programs during this time.) From these recordings, we selected a random sample of 40 half-hour programs and embedded commercials for analysis.

Although definitions applied to studies of televised violence differ, the content of these definitions is similar. Some studies refer to the use of physical force that hurts or kills; other studies refer to expressions of physical force, compelling actions against one’s will, and being threatened, hurt, or killed; and still other studies rely on the overly broad definition in the *National Television Violence Study* (1996). We defined violent acts in accord with definitions set out in tort law (relating to intentional harm to persons) and constitutional law (with respect to property damage). Four specific acts were identified: (1) assault, which is the threat of immediate bodily harm or offensive contact to another person; (2) battery and other intentional injury, which is intentionally causing physical or emotional distress to another person; (3) homicide, which is an act that would terminate a person’s vital functions; and (4) damage to property, which is any diminution in the condition or usability of personal property. The two coders we hired used these four definitions to identify violent acts.

Portrayals of violence by cartoon characters and humans were not differentiated. To focus on the most compelling acts of violence, we ignored legal issues—such as defamation, trespass, conversion, and fraud—moral issues, foul language, and weaponry displays.

**Results**

Television commercials are of two types: (1) *sponsor ads*, which are paid commercials external to programs, and (2) *spots for upcoming programs*, which are pieced together from clips culled from upcoming programs. As independently created commercials, sponsor ads, which may be placed by either local affiliates or networks, do not assume the content of the program in which they are embedded.
On Saturday morning telecasts targeted at children, the incidence of violence acts is lower in programs (1.32 per minute) than in embedded commercials (3.46 per minute). The most intense source of televised violence is not the programs or sponsor ads, but the spots for upcoming programs. For example, the most violent 30-minute programming block contained 101 acts of violence in eight spots for upcoming programs, but only 17 acts of violence in six sponsor ads. This combined 16.88 violent acts per commercial minute (i.e., 118 acts in 7 minutes) is more than double the 7.57 rate per program minute (i.e., 174 acts in 23 minutes). Seemingly, broadcasters have taken the most violent scenes from upcoming programs and concentrated them into 30-second promotional spots. We found no relationship between the violence in sponsor ads and the violence in programs.

A Modest Proposal

The V-chip and rating system used for programming could be extended to commercials embedded in programs targeted primarily at children. Because the definition of violence has been established for programs, the same descriptors could be used for commercials. The airing of violent commercials can be outside a network’s control—local affiliates may schedule spots. However, if commercials embedded in programs for children are rated by violent content, then the party responsible for their scheduling is irrelevant.

Although some parents and public policy makers may fret that a commercial rating system would create a forbidden fruit effect, an overly violent yet rated commercial would be occluded by the V-chip, so susceptible children could never see it. Thus, the forbidden fruit effect, like that caused by warning labels on music CDs and videos, cannot occur.

Modifying current V-chips is unnecessary under this proposal. Using existing technology and content descriptors to screen commercials is viable and serves all interests. Parents could set the level of acceptable violence using an industry-wide standard and make more informed decisions about their children’s television viewing. Public policy makers could avoid a no win decision that would antagonize either free speech or public welfare advocates.

About the Authors

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Attest ing to his writing compulsion are 80 academic journal articles, 45 conference papers (10 which won a ‘best paper’ award), four co-authored/co-edited books, 25 other academic contributions, and 30 non-academic works. He is known for his collection of Looney Tunes shirts, inability to chip a golf ball correctly, encyclopedic knowledge of classic Hollywood movies, overly neat office, and loyalty to the New York Yankees.

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