

## EXERCISE 9

# Media Violence Research Project

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*In this study you will have the opportunity to examine how much violence occurs in one of the most popular and pervasive of modern communication media - television - and discuss how that violence affects you and other members of society. This assignment involves you first hand in social science research. It is a different exercise from many others. You will be involved in two-way communication with important policy makers and business leaders. Your research results, discussion, and suggestions will be summarized in letter form and forwarded to television network personnel and sponsors. Often, your thoughtful letters are carefully considered and responded to. You will probably receive personal letters from the company officers to whom you write. In the past, students have even received phone calls and face-to-face visits from network and sponsor personnel. They have been asked to explain their research in more detail and to elaborate on the opinions they expressed. Important, influential, and concerned people will read and respond to your letters. Take this opportunity to demonstrate to those persons your careful and creative scholarship. Take your research seriously. Other people will. Several students in past classes have used this assignment as part of their personnel file in order to demonstrate their research skills.*

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### I. Background

Before beginning this assignment, it is recommended that you read two short but important scientific research reports pertaining to the effects of viewing violence on subsequent behavior: "The Effects of Observing Violence" by Leonard Berkowitz, *Scientific American*, February 1964, 210, (2); and "Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties," 1, Summary Report, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institute of Mental Health, 5600 Fishers Lane, Rockville, MD 20857. You should be thoroughly familiar with these summaries of the scientific evidence in order to complete this assignment. A major portion of this assignment rests on your ability to communicate the essential findings of these studies to a reader who is not familiar with them. *Read Them Now and Outline Them Carefully!*

## II. Research and Analysis

According to the Nielson television rating service (1984), the average American watches approximately 4-1/2 hours of television every day. By the time individuals reach 18 years of age, they have spent the equivalent of more than 2-1/2 years watching TV nonstop around the clock and have seen the equivalent of 6 months of constant commercials. From this continual and extensive viewing, people learn much about the world in which they live, the kinds of people surrounding them, and the kinds of behavior that are appropriate and typical of themselves and others. What impression do Americans receive from their television viewing concerning violent behavior? To find out, you will conduct an analysis of television programming. This involves several steps.

### A. Select a Viewing Period

Each researcher, or pair of researchers if you are working with a partner, should analyze the content of three consecutive half-hours of TV time during the appointed research days. You should select your viewing period between the dates to be announced in class or printed on your course schedule. To avoid duplication of researcher efforts, your instructor may circulate a sign-up sheet. You may analyze any 1-1/2 hours period after 7 P.M. not previously selected by another student. Viewing should take place on one of the major network affiliates broadcasting in your area, i.e., ABC, NBC, or CBS. In order to ensure as representative a sample as possible, please select your viewing times **WITHOUT REFERENCE TO PUBLISHED PROGRAM INFORMATION**, that is, without knowing exactly what programs will be shown on the selected station at the time period you choose. Once you have selected a time period, it is imperative that you faithfully collect data then and only then. This is essential to avoid duplication when many students are working on the project and to ensure as representative a sample of program content as possible. If you wish to analyze a viewing period longer than 1-1/2 hours, you may do so. This may provide the advantage of allowing you to completely view shows beginning before or continuing after the end of your selected period and thus enable you to comment upon them more completely. If you choose to extend your viewing period your "Violent Acts Coding Form" and "Sponsor Logs" (see below) should be extended accordingly. No omissions should be made for the assigned viewing period.

### B. Preparing for Data Collection

In order to obtain and record the information needed concerning violence, it will be necessary to make certain preparations prior to the selected viewing period.

1. First, each researcher, or team, must have access to a functioning TV. Since notes will be taken as programming progresses, arrange a table where you can write conveniently. If your roommate suddenly barges in and wants to watch a show on another channel, or a half dozen of your friends drop by for a few beers during your selected viewing period, the quality of your analysis will be seriously endangered. Make sure you will have the uninterrupted use of the set, preferably where you can watch by yourself or with your partner, if you choose to work with one.
2. Second, it is *strongly* recommended that you obtain an audio or video recording of the sound track of *all* programming. This is no substitute for actual viewing, but during the final write-up of your data it will help serve as a reminder of characters and events that took place. Often you can borrow tape recorders from roommates, relatives, or friends. A videotape recorder, of course, is better suited to this purpose. Whatever the recording device, *PRACTICE* using it in advance so that you can change tapes quickly and so that the resultant recording is audible and clear.

### C. Coding

You will need some sort of coding form on which to record a brief description of the action that takes place and the characters involved. You may design whatever sort of form is most convenient for your purposes. All coding forms should be turned in along with your final report. A sample of such a coding

form is attached for your reference. You may need several of these forms (3 or 4?) to accommodate all the material covered during your selected viewing time. Be sure you have sufficient copies in advance.

The coding form should contain the following information:

1. A description of the violent act(s). (See below.)
2. A description of the perpetrator(s). This should include a note about (a) the major social roles the perpetrator acts out and (b) the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim. For example, the perpetrator might be an *employee of the FBI*, a uniformed *policeman*, a federal prison *inmate*, an estranged *husband*, a *housewife* who abuses her children, a teenage *gang member*, etc. Some persons, typically TV "bad guys," are not portrayed so that you can learn much about the major social roles they occupy. However, do your best to estimate the approximate age, sex, race, or ethnic affiliation, and socioeconomic status of each perpetrator. Your estimates can be based upon the physical appearance, surrounding, and behaviors of the individuals, or other cues. You should be as objective in this phase of the project as possible. Avoid basing your descriptions on your liking or disliking a particular character.

Perpetrators have a relationship to victims of violence and other significant persons in the program. These relationships can be specified. The perpetrator may be a social worker's *client*, the estranged *wife* of the victimized husband, a next-door *neighbor*, etc. Some perpetrators may be total strangers to their victims, as in the case of the bomber pilot who drops napalm on a village or of the executioner who is paid to behead, hang, gas, or electrocute people.

3. A description of the victim(s). This should include the same information as used in describing the perpetrator, i.e., major social roles, age, sex, race, and/or ethnic affiliation and socioeconomic status, the relationship of the victim to the perpetrator and other significant persons on the program.
4. *Definition of Violence.* The following definition may be used to determine if a particular act is violence: The intentional injury of or attempt to injure another person or restrict his or her freedom of action against his or her will.

By this definition violence would include:

One person slapping another on the face during an argument but not a slap on the back to clear the breathing passages of a person who was choking on a piece of food.

Robin Hood shooting one of the Sheriff of Nottingham's deputies, but not William Tell accidentally injuring his son while trying to repeat his famous apple-shooting performance for friends. Remember that, as the story goes, William Tell first shot the apple off his son's head under threat from the "evil" sheriff, so in the first instance of apple shooting, had an injury occurred, it would be considered a violent act, with Tell's son as victim and the sheriff as perpetrator. In the first instance, the participants possibly acted of their own volition.

Forcing persons to act against their will by threat of violence such as holding them at gun or knife point, threatening to strike them, or otherwise do them injury are other examples.

In deciding whether or not an action is violent, use these criteria:

- a. Did the perpetrator INTEND to injure the victim at all or was the resultant injury beyond the control of the perpetrator? People such as arsonists or bomber pilots, who commit acts that they know may cause injury to unspecified persons are counted as intending injury unless they take purposeful action to avoid injury to others, such as burning only empty buildings or dropping bombs in the ocean.

- b. Was the act committed against the victim's will or did he or she seek out and solicit the resultant injury? Patients being cut by surgeons performing operations that the patients have requested are not violence victims, nor are willing partners engaged in sexual activity. People cut in knife fights and barroom brawls, even if they do not intentionally flee these encounters, policemen injured in the line of duty, and prison inmates "roughed up" by guards *are* violence victims. So are persons who are forced into sexual activity against their will - rape victims - even though the initial interaction with the attacker may have been nonviolent or even friendly.
5. *Description.* In describing violent acts you must do exactly that, DESCRIBE the act. Do not categorize it in legalistic terminology. Also omit modifiers of the situation, which reflect your judgment about whether the act was right or wrong. Saying someone struck another person with a "vicious" or "nasty" blow tells us only about prejudices, not actual events. Don't say someone "murdered" another. Murder is a legal term, not a description of behavior. Rather, you might say someone fired a handgun at someone else who apparently died of the resultant wounds. To say someone "beat up" someone else tells us less than to note that the perpetrator used his fists to strike the victim approximately five times in the face and upper body and then struck at the base of the skull with a bottle. Remember, try your best to describe the acts of violence you observe without value judgment terms.

### III. Application

The second portion of the project focuses on the application of your findings and conclusions. You will need to obtain specific types of information in order to complete this section of the assignment.

#### A. Program Sponsor Log and Network Identification

It is essential that a complete record be kept of sponsors advertising on the shows you analyze. You will not be able to do your final write-up without this record. Your tape recording of the sound or video-sound track will help make the construction of a log easier. This log should include:

1. Program title and a brief description of the theme of the show, e.g., "Adam 12, half-hour rerun of dramatized accounts of LAPD patrol officers' presumed experiences."
2. Product(s) or services advertised. What is being sold: toothpaste, deodorant, dog food, investment counseling? Stipulate brands and types where appropriate.
3. What company manufactures or provides the product or service advertised? The proper title and complete mailing address of the company is required. This information should be obtained for the sponsor to whom you intend writing, generally the one who purchased the most ad time during your viewing period. You will need to do some library research to obtain this information and the information required in 4 and 5 below.

The remaining information is necessary for your selected sponsor:

4. Two other products produced by the same company. Include the brand and types of these products as well.
5. To what specific person will your letter be addressed? You will need to identify the full name and title of a major company officer in the sponsoring firm.
6. What is the full name, address, including zip, and title of the network official to whom you will be writing? Note: find the network address and officer, *not* the local affiliate. This is the person to

whom you should address your letters, unless the program you watched was produced entirely by the local station. If in doubt, call or write the local station network affiliate and ask for the national network address and the name of the appropriate officer.

The library can provide information about sponsors of television shows, including names of officers of the company and addresses of company headquarters. The best source is *The Standard Directory of Advertisers*, which is published annually.

A sample of a sponsor log is attached. You may use this form or design your own as long as your form contains the same information. Additional copies may be needed. Be sure you have these available before your viewing time.

#### B. Write-up

Two letters should be written. One is to be addressed to a sponsor from the sponsor log, the other to *the network which prepared and/or aired the program* on which the ad appeared. Again, this is *not* the local network affiliate, unless it actually produced the show. As recommended, select the sponsor who was represented most frequently on the show that you watched, if more than one appeared. Public service announcements from noncommercial organizations are not considered sponsors although they should be recorded on your sponsor log. Each of your letters should contain the following elements:

1. **Introduction.** You should mention the reason for writing - to express your opinion about violence on television and its impact on society and you.
2. **Methods.** A summary statement of how data were collected should follow the introduction: What shows were watched, what information was collected, how was it recorded?
3. **Results.** A summary of the amount and types of violence observed on the show sponsored or produced by the addressee. If the viewing period you selected did not contain any violence that you were able to discern, then that is the result of your investigation. It is not necessary to "find" violence to complete this assignment. Follow the instructions carefully and you will produce a useful piece of research and offer important feedback to TV show producers and sponsors. Report *exactly* what you found. Do not overlook acts of violence, however small, and do not invent violent action. Social science research requires reporting the facts accurately and in detail, not wishful thinking pro or con. In sections 5 and 6, you are asked to express your opinion about these results, violent shows, and if you like, television in general. You may be pleased, bored, relieved, or otherwise impressed with a TV program that contains little or no violence. The place to express those personal feelings is in your opinion statements.
4. **Summary of Scientific Evidence.** This is the most important section of your letter. What research has been done to study the effects of watching violence on subsequent behavior? The Berkowitz article and the Surgeon General's report offer important findings and make reference to many others. Remember, the people you are writing to have not read these articles so be sure to explain them carefully and in detail. Be sure to point out that television influences adults as well as children and that people *cannot* distinguish between reality and the world of television in many cases. If you quote directly from the articles, be sure to provide complete citations - title, author, publication date, and source - in your letter. The use of appropriate quotations is recommended.
5. **How Does this Sort of Programming Affect YOU?** How is your personal behavior altered because of the broader social influence of televised violence? Are you afraid to go out alone at night because you believe you will be a victim of TV-like violence? A majority of homicides in the United States are committed by family members, friends, neighbors, and acquaintances, not the greedy or insane stranger depicted on TV. The weapon most often employed is a handgun. Television convinces many people that they need a gun for "protection" against a mythical hoard of intruders. These

weapons are used in turn during family arguments, drinking parties, or neighborhood disputes to kill family members, friends, and neighbors, not strangers. Has television made your world a more dangerous place? What problems do *you* face because violence is prevalent on TV? Remember, TV stations and sponsors design and air programs for only one reason - profit. For them program content is of secondary importance. Violence on television may be profitable, whatever its long-term effects on the rest of society might be. Should any one segment of society limit the expression of ideas of another? The question is elegantly considered in John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty* (1859). Read it at your leisure and think about it. A contemporary short story by Ursula Le Guin, "The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas" pp 216-219 Alan Sadovnik, et. al. eds. (New York: Harper and Row, 1987) provides another relevant illustration. Do you think any segment of society has the right to prosper when it knowingly and purposely inflicts misery or discord on other people? Do sponsors have a moral right to profit from violence? Tell them what *you* think.

6. **What Should Be Done?** What recommendations do you have for sponsors and networks? Be specific. Comments such as "Violence should be reduced on TV" are of little use. Who will be in charge of this reduction? Who will oversee this process? Government officials at the federal level, the local level, the networks themselves? What sorts of penalties would you recommend for violators, and most importantly, *who would enforce these penalties?* Should stations with a high proportion of violent programming be fined or have their licenses revoked? Should sponsors of violent shows face consumer boycotts; be identified by government officials as unwholesome, or be required to pay into a fund for victims of violence? The suggestions are up to you. Be imaginative in your attempt to solve this very real problem. In every case, be sure to make recommendations.

As suggested previously, it is possible that the viewing period you select may contain little or no acts of violence. This is a legitimate research finding like any other. In composing your letters, report the show content as it appeared. Do not invent data. Do express your opinion regarding the presence or absence of violence in your assigned viewing period. Did this sort of programming demonstrate the ability of networks and sponsors to provide quality viewing without violence? Was it overly simplistic, artificial, or unrealistic because real life events such as interpersonal and institutional violence were purposely excluded? Comment on the programs viewed as you deem appropriate. Each of the other elements of your letter should be included per these instructions. Your introduction (1) and discussion of methods (2) should not be affected by program content. You should comment concerning the effects of violent programming upon you and provide specific recommendations for program review as called for in (5) and (6), whatever the content of the viewing period you watched.

7. **Additional Topics.** All of the foregoing six elements are required in each letter that you write. You may wish to *improve* your letter by including observations on some or all of the following issues or others you deem important. These need not be limited in scope to the viewing time assigned to you but may involve comments about other programs you may have seen on that same network and/or sponsored by the same company.
  - a. How often were socially approved goals (wealth, respect, prestige) achieved by violent means? Consider the length of time and frequency with which violence is depicted as being an effective means of achieving one's goals. Are violent people shown as successful and prosperous for 28 minutes and getting caught or otherwise negatively sanctioned only in the last 2 minutes of the show? What can people learn from this kind of programming?
  - b. Do "good guys" use violence to achieve socially approved ends? How often does this happen? Give examples.
  - c. Do "bad guys" who act violently achieve their goals if they initiate the violence, if someone else initiates the violence and they reciprocate, acting violently in return? How often does this happen? Can you give examples? What can viewers learn, and how may their own behavior be affected by this sort of depiction of violence?

- d. Is violence portrayed as justifiable for some persons? How often is this so? Give examples. What can people learn from this, and how may it affect their behavior?
- e. Do virtuous people, i.e., "good guys," who act violently suffer any significant negative consequences for their violent acts? How often does this happen? Can you give examples? What can viewers learn from this, and, subsequently, how are they likely to behave?
- f. Are the effects of violence depicted realistically or are they made to appear less gruesome, messy, painful, or debilitating than real life? How often does this happen? Can you give examples?

### C. A Word on Personal Responsibility

You are asked to report factually on what you observe during your viewing period and to summarize the scientific evidence concerning television's influence on behavior. You are free to agree or disagree with this scientific research. Your opinions, your summary of the relevant research evidence, and your observations collectively contribute to your conclusions. As you write, use first person pronouns. For example: "As a matter of personal concern, I watched [name of show] [produced by your network/sponsored by your product]. During the course of that show, I kept records of acts of violence. I observed such acts. This is of concern to me. Scientific research on televised violence has shown [summary of research finding, etc.]..." Do *not* copy this awkward format but *do* observe the way in which it gives the letter writer credit for the observations, recommendations, and conclusions. If you do not believe in something, do not put it in your letter. Express only those positions you genuinely believe to be true. There are no "correct" or "incorrect" opinions, although there is well-documented scientific evidence. You will be evaluated on the basis of the completeness, clarity, and accuracy of your letter and not by any other standard. A first-rate letter is informative. It summarizes the research available, communicates your personal concerns, and reports accurately the events that transpired in the shows you watched.

Do *not* introduce your letter by transferring responsibility for your work to some classroom assignment, with comments such as "I'm doing an assignment for my sociology class. My teacher said I had to write a letter to get a good grade." You may, and probably should, identify yourself by name. You may use your academic affiliation. When referring to your college or university, use the proper name, not initials. This perhaps is not necessary and your letter will be equally convincing without the reference. Comments about required assignments or class projects should be strictly avoided.

### D. Format, Grammar, and Spelling

Your letter also may be evaluated on the basis of form, grammar, spelling, and overall neatness as well as substantive content.

*Format.* Use a format appropriate for business correspondence, including the addressee's *complete* address above the salutation and your complete address (or addresses if working with a partner) beneath your name(s) at the bottom of the letter. A note on student addresses: for all terms except spring you may use your school mailing address. This address must be complete, including (a) your full name, (b) street name and number, (c) apartment or room number, if appropriate, and labeled as such (e.g., Room 107; Apt. 29), (d) city, (e) state, and (f) zip code. If any of these elements are omitted, the address will be considered incomplete. During spring term, use your permanent mailing address where correspondence will reach you during the summer, if this is different from your school address. All the elements of the address above should be included.

When writing to sponsors and television networks, you will be preparing and forwarding your comments to a human being, a whole, real person. Please use addresses accordingly. These should include (a) person's full name (first and last) to whom you are writing, not just "Mr. Jones," etc.; (b) that person's business or professional title, e.g., President, Chair of the Board, Vice-President for Marketing, etc.; (c) street name

and address; (d) city; (e) state; and (f) zip code. The procedures to be followed to obtain sponsor, network, newspaper addresses, officer names and titles from the library have been outlined above. Obtaining correct and complete addresses for these persons is part of the assignment. Do the job carefully. The format of one of your letters to a "typical" sponsor might look like the example which follows:

February 31, 1990

Mr. John Q. Megabucks, Vice-President  
for Decontamination  
Megalomania Atomic Power Company, Inc.  
Nuclear Toilets Division  
1 Nuclear Wasteland Plaza, Suite 666  
Ground Zero, New York 10001

Dear Mr. Megabucks:

[Your letter here.]

Sincerely,

[Signature here]

[Signature here]

Mr. Intelligent Ignatz  
State University  
Campus Lodge, Room 999  
Middletown, USA 55555

Ms. Thoughtful Thompson  
State University  
College Hall, Room 001  
Middletown, USA 55555

**E. The "Friend Reading" Test**

College is a time when we all learn one basic and critical skill - the ability to organize and communicate our ideas in writing. This is perhaps the most important aspect of your entire college experience, hopefully augmented by a broadened curiosity, willingness to withhold judgment, and some familiarity with research resources, such as the literature in sociology. The following process will help develop these writing skills. After you have finished your first draft on your assignment, give a copy to a friend whose opinion you value. Ask them to tell you what you are trying to communicate. If their version of your ideas is confused or incomplete, chances are you need to rewrite all or part of your work, either elaborating or shortening until you can pass the "friend reading" test. You might find a second friend for the second reading. Chances are if your friends can't understand what you are trying to say, neither will the recipient of your letter. Be sure to have your readers sign and date the reminder sheet.



**F. What to Turn in**

At the back of this assignment is a reminder sheet that allows you to keep track of the various parts of the exercise. The column labeled "check" is for your use. When you have finished a part of the assignment and put it in the assignment envelope labeled with your name(s), check that item off on the reminder sheet. The reminder sheet must be turned in along with your other materials. The assignment envelope is a standard 9-1/2" x 12-1/2" envelope that you can purchase at a stationery or variety store.

Turn in your letters along with photocopies. The copies will be graded. Originals will be examined for completeness and mailed promptly. On the photocopies only, you should number the sections of your letter that correspond to the six required elements. This should be done by drawing a line around each section and putting the number of the elements that section represents, in the margin to the left, preferably with a brief section title such as (1) introduction, (2) methods, (3) results, (4) scientific evidence, (5) personal impact, and (6) recommendations.

Letters are to be typed, single or 1-1/2 spaced, and accompanied by a correctly addressed, stamped business-size (4" x 9-1/2") envelope. All letters are to be signed with the full name of the student(s) preparing them. Normally none should exceed 1,500 words or 3 pages in length.

MEDIA VIOLENCE RESEARCH PROJECT-SPONSOR LOG

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Viewing Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Viewing Time: From \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

National Network Affiliate: ABC CBS NBC

Local Station Call Letters \_\_\_\_\_ Channel No. \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_

Program Title \_\_\_\_\_

Advertised  
Product(s)  
or Services

Company Responsible  
and Complete  
Mailing Address

Company Officer to  
Whom Letter should  
be Sent, Title

Two Other Products  
Manufactured by  
this Company

Advertised Product(s) or Services	Company Responsible and Complete Mailing Address	Company Officer to Whom Letter should be Sent, Title	Two Other Products Manufactured by this Company

(Duplicate this page or design your own coding form to record all sponsors.)

**MEDIA VIOLENCE RESEARCH PROJECT - VIOLENT ACT CODING FORM**

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_ Viewing Date \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Viewing Time: From \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_

Local Station Call Letters \_\_\_\_\_ Channel No. \_\_\_\_\_ City: \_\_\_\_\_

Program Title \_\_\_\_\_

Description of Violent Act	Perpetrator(s)	Victim(s)

(Duplicate this page or your own coding form as needed to record all violence.)

MEDIA VIOLENCE RESEARCH PROJECT - REMINDER SHEET

Name(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Friend Reader \_\_\_\_\_

Signature

Print Name

Phone Number

Item	Point possible	Complete	Inadequate	Marginal	Points awarded	Check	Remarks
Assignment envelope, 9-1/2" x 12-1/2" with student name(s), phone number(s), course, term, and year.							
Violent Act Coding Form complete with heading information, description(s) of act(s) of perpetrator(s) and victim(s)							
Sponsor Log complete with heading information, program title, product advertised, 2 other products manufactured by this company (the sponsor selected to receive letter)							
Tape Recording of audio portion of shows watched, with your name(s), show name(s), and date clearly labeled							
Original letters-signed, stamped, addressed to appropriate officer, typed, folded, <u>unsealed</u> , return address (-10 for <u>any</u> omissions): Network _____ Sponsor _____							
Labeled letter copies (originals will <u>not</u> be accepted) introduction _____ methods _____ results _____ scientific evidence _____ personal impact _____ recommendations _____ other observations _____							
Reminder Sheet, complete							