

Results of a major project by the ABA indicate that the level of concern about the portrayal of violence on free-to-air television has decreased over the past decade.

Community attitudes to violence on free-to-air television

Australian Broadcasting Authority research shows the community's level of concern about television violence has decreased since 1989

Approximately 14 per cent of adult respondents in a national survey of 1298 adult Australians spontaneously mentioned the portrayal of violence on free-to-air television as a concern. This figure indicates that the level of unprompted concern about the portrayal of violence has decreased since the 1989 Australian Broadcasting Tribunal study, which reported that 25% of adults spontaneously mentioned violence as a concern. However, a significant majority of those surveyed (64%) selected violence as a concern when presented with it as an option, in a list of potential concerns. In 1989, 78% nominated violence as a concern when prompted. When considered in light of the earlier ABT study, these results indicate that there has been a decrease in the number of people who are concerned about violence on television since 1989.

The depiction of violence is a key component of the classification scheme and the news and current affairs provisions contained within the Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice. The ABA has commended the findings of the 2002 study to Commercial Television Australia (CTVA) to consider in its 2003 review of the code.

The study report will be released during the forthcoming ABA conference. It will be available for purchase and published electronically on the ABA website at www.aba.gov.au

Research objectives

The main objective of the ABA's research was to assess any changes in community attitudes to violence on free-to-air television between the 1989 and 2002 surveys by determining the level of community concern about television violence, and whether this concern was more pronounced for certain groups in the community. The research also investigated community attitudes to the portrayal, presentation and reporting of violence on television, identifying the perceived effects of televised violence and which groups in the community are considered to be most at risk from exposure to such material. Another objective was to assess the level of knowledge and awareness of existing methods of control and regulation of free-to-air television content, with a specific focus on classification categories, consumer advice and warnings.

Methodology

In August 2002, the ABA commissioned ACNielsen to conduct the fieldwork and data analysis for the project. Interviewing for the survey was conducted between 27 August and 4 September 2002. While the fieldwork required for a study of this size would ordinarily have continued for a longer period, care was taken to avoid interviewing in the week before and after September 11. This was due to a concern that media coverage leading up to the anniversary of this event had the potential to bias certain responses.

A final sample of 1572 subjects was

recruited for the 2002 survey, comprising 1298 adults aged 17 years or over and 274 teenagers aged 13 to 16 years.

Attitudes to violence on free-to-air television

Violence on television remains the greatest community concern in 2002, as it was in 1989. The difference across these two points in time is the community's level of concern. In 2002, 14% of adults spontaneously mentioned violence as a concern, while in 1989 a quarter (25%) of the population expressed this view. Survey respondents were also asked whether they were very concerned, quite concerned or not at all concerned about the following aspects of television: a) the amount of abusive language; b) the amount of nudity; c) sex scenes and d) the amount of violence. The results for 2002 and 1989 are summarised in Figure 1. When prompted, a majority of the 1298 adult Australians thought that the portrayal of violence on free-to-air television was a matter for concern:

- 64% of adults indicated that they were quite or very concerned about television violence (This is a decrease from the 78% of adults who reported a concern about television violence in the 1989 survey);
- Those who were more likely to be quite or very concerned about television violence tended to be older, female, a parent, religious and do not subscribe to pay TV;
- 54% of adults feel that there is 'too much' violence on television (a *de-*

crease from 1989 when the level was 60%);

- Those who felt there is too much violence tended to be: older, female, a parent, religious and have either lower secondary or tertiary education. Pay TV subscribers appear to be less concerned with this issue than those who do not subscribe.

Reactions to violent television content

To examine whether a relationship existed between a stated concern with television violence and a behavioural response to avoid such content, survey respondents were asked if they have ever changed channels or turned off the television because the content of the program was too violent. Even though the current survey demonstrated that the level of concern with violence has decreased, adults are just as likely to switch channels to avoid violence, and teenagers are perhaps more likely to than they were in 1989.

- 63% of adults and 44% of teenagers indicated having switched off or changed channels to avoid violence at least once. This is slightly more than the 61% of adults and 38% of teenagers reported in 1989.
- 30% of teenagers report that their parents do intervene and stop them from watching certain types of television programs, a similar finding for 1989.
- Teenagers who indicated that their parents do intervene with their viewing were then asked what type of programs their parents stop them from watching. The top four were: sex scenes (26%); coarse or bad-language (22%); M/MA rated (20%), and violent programs (17%). It should be noted that these results differ from the 1989 findings where violence was the main reason (40%) for parents intervening, followed by AO or R rated programs (30%); sex scenes (24%) and horror (20%).

Perceptions of the impact of violence

Adults believe children and teenagers are the most vulnerable to violence on

television, with the key effect being desensitisation or 'getting used to it'. However, teenagers are less likely now to agree that 'there is so much violence on television you just get used to seeing it'.

Justification of television violence

Adult survey respondents were asked if they think it is justified to show violence on television. Overall 59% of adults feel it is justified to show violence on television (an *increase* of 8% from the 1989 figures). The 2002 survey found that fewer people believe that it is justifiable to show violence on news (30%) or current affairs programs (7%). These figures reveal a significant decline in comparison to the 1989 results of 46% and 12% respectively. However, more people now believe that it is justifiable to show violence in movies or dramas (2002: 16%; 1989: 7%) or late in the evening (2002: 25%; 1989: 10%). Differences in the change in attitudes to violence on news or current affairs programs were due to gender.

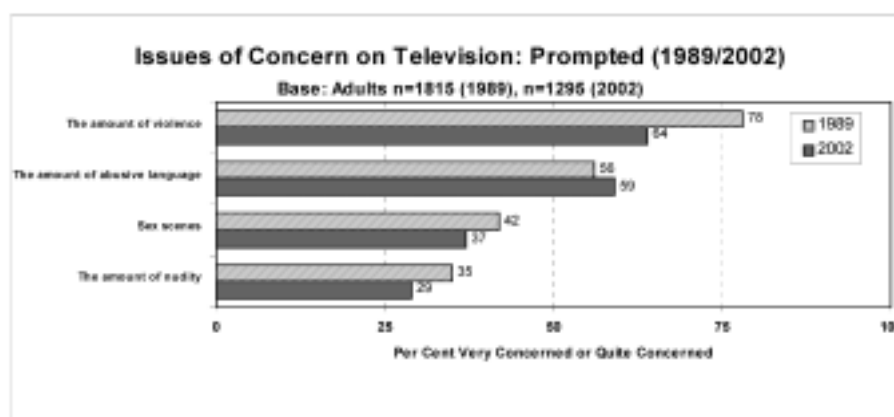
- Females (38%) are more likely than males (24%) to think that violence on news is justified (In 1989 the results were: females 51%, males 42%) Males (20%) are slightly more likely than females (15%) to think violence is justified when it is part of a story line (In 1989 the results were: males 17%, females 11%).
- As in 1989, the current findings demonstrated that even though females were the most concerned with violence on television, they were more

likely than males to accept the presentation of violence in a news context.

Regulation and control

Survey respondents were questioned about their attitudes to regulation to determine if these had changed since the 1989 study.

- There was strong agreement that people should be able to watch what they like on television, with adults (82%) more likely to agree with this view than teenagers (71%). This finding is in contrast to the 1989 results, where both adults (81%) and teenagers (86%) displayed similar levels of agreement.
- The proportion of people who want more control of violence on television has decreased from 84% of adults in 1989 to 73% of adults in 2002. This trend was also evident in the teenage sample (a decrease from 74% in 1989 to 58% in 2002).
- The survey found an extremely high awareness of regulations and controls with 98% of respondents aware of classification symbols before programs; 94% aware of consumer advice; 93% noted warnings about story content before a news or current affairs item and 83% were aware of the existence of time restrictions.
- Ninety-seven per cent of respondents who were aware of classification symbols were also confident of the meaning of at least some of the symbols. The study showed that adults and teenagers have similar levels of understanding.



Television violence as an issue in 1989 and 2002 - prompted findings