What S Wrong With Television Violence Essay, Research Paper

Clearly, something is wrong. Broadcasters are licensed to serve “the

public interest, convenience and necessity.” They are paid to deliver

receptive audiences to their business sponsors. Few industries are as

public relations-conscious as television. What compels them to endure

public humiliation, risk the threat of repressive legislation and invite

charges of undermining health, security and the social order?

The usual rationalization that violence delivers the goods — it “gives

the audience what it wants” — is disingenuous. As the trade knows well

and as we shall see, violence as such is not highly rated. That means

that it coasts on viewer inertia, not selection.

Unlike other media use, viewing is a ritual; people watch by the clock

and not by the program. To the limited extent that some programs have a

larger share of certain time-slots and can, therefore, extract a higher

price for commercials, violent programs in those time slots may yield

the broadcaster some marginal profits. For a robust industry, sensitive

to public and legislative criticism, those incremental profits are

hardly worth the social, institutional and political damage violent

programs exact.

Something is wrong with the way the problem has been posed and

addressed. A virtual obsession with asking the wrong question obscures

the factors that in fact drive violence and trap the industry in a

difficult dilemma. The usual question — “Does television violence

incite real-life violence?” — is itself a symptom rather than

diagnostic tool of the problem. Despite its alarming implications, and

intent, or perhaps because of them, it distracts from focusing on the

major conditions producing violence in society and limits discussion of

television violence to its most simplistic dimension.

Violence is a complex scenario and social relationship. Whatever else it

does, violence in drama and news demonstrates power. It portrays

victims, as well as victimizers. It intimidates, as well as incites. It

shows one’s place in the “pecking order” that runs society. And, it

“travels well” on the world market.