

ASSAULT AND MURDER IN OUR HOMES DAILY

VIOLENCE ON NAMIBIAN TELEVISION

2000

Where in Namibia can you witness more than 2 dozen murders and almost 200 other incidents of violence in a single month? The shocking answer is, on NBC. In this article, Dianne Hubbard of the Legal Assistance Centre looks at television violence and its impact on Namibian children.

In local discussions of violence against women, many people have raised questions about the impact of violence on television. The Legal Assistance Centre decided to watch one month of NBC programming (October 1998) to find out just how much violence is shown by our national network.

If your child had watched television that month between the hours of 14h00 and 20h00 on weekdays, and all day on weekends, he or she would have been exposed to 24 murders, more than 30 violent assaults, and 5 sexual assaults. Even some programs marketed toward children, such as the movie *Jumanji* (which aired at 18h00 on a Sunday), contained incidents of assault which could be disturbing to younger viewers. Previews alone, which air at times when younger eyes may be watching, contained 16 violent incidents.

A person viewing NBC that month from 18h00 each evening until the end of broadcasting, and all day long on weekends, would have seen even more violence – a total of 224 violent incidents were either portrayed or described.

So, if the month surveyed was a typical one, in a single year of television watching, a child might see more than 700 episodes of violence (including 288 murders), and an adult television viewer could see more than 2600 violent incidents.

The victims of NBC television violence were of both sexes and all age groups and races. At least 49 violent incidents were directed against females, 46 against men, and 46 against children. Five incidents of domestic violence were depicted, including three in one program which tellingly portrayed the its impact on woman's life, thus possibly serving an educational function.

We have no statistics on how much television Namibians watch. But we know that the average American child spends almost 24 hours per week in front of the television set. By age 18, the average American teenager will have spent more time watching television than learning in the classroom. Such excessive amounts of television viewing are cause for concern. The American Association of Pediatrics suggests that second only to the family, television is the most important influence on child development and behaviour.

But is there any connection between television violence and violence in the real world? Reliable studies say yes. According to the Journal of the American Medical Association, 22-34% of young male felons imprisoned for committing violent crimes report having consciously imitated crime techniques watched on television. All Canadian and U.S. studies of the effect of prolonged childhood exposure to television show a positive relationship between early exposure to television violence and later physical aggressiveness. For example, one national US study shows that viewing certain programs

of violence can increase aggressiveness in children, and desensitize them to violent behaviour by others.

Excessive television viewing has also been connected with early sexual activity, obesity, and the use of drugs or alcohol. Too much television can also lead to poor language and social skills, because these are most effectively fostered in children through interactive talk and play. Academic performance is negatively affected when children spend more time watching television than reading and doing homework, or when they stay up late to watch television and so do not get enough sleep. Physical development is hampered when television replaces sports and other outdoor play.

On the other hand, some children's programming aired by NBC during the sample month was more positive. For example, the children's television show *The Polka Dot Door* encourages youngsters to get up and move around, often pretending to be animals or characters from stories told on the show. The internationally acclaimed children's programme *Sesame Street* enhances language development in preschool-age children, as well as fostering positive values such as respect for cultural differences and sensitivity to persons with disabilities.

The stated mission of NBC is "to effectively inform, educate and entertain the people of Namibia in order to promote peace, national unity and development". Tangeni Mureko, Public Relations Officer at NBC, states that he believes that violent television programming influences society, and especially the young people within it. He goes on to state that in developing countries, where fictional television and films are rarely produced, viewers often do not understand that television dramas are not depictions of actual events. He states that input from the public regarding the violence of some programming, usually communicated through telephone calls to NBC, are taken quite seriously in evaluating whether further such material is aired. NBC is presently conducting a review of all its programming over its ten-year history, based in part on such telephone input.

Mureko sees the creation of Namibian television and films by and for Namibians as one way to curb the negative influence of television violence, since affordable, non-violent programming is difficult to obtain from outside sources. He states, "We must concentrate on our own content and our own co-productions since TV is a powerful medium for society."

NBC has shown awareness of the issue of violence and other social issues. Programs and pilot scripts are being developed, with participating partners, to deal with the issues of rape and sexual harassment in schools. Donations of advertising time have promoted public awareness on the topic of child maintenance and HIV/AIDS. A locally-produced drama on rape, incest and domestic violence, called *A Trust Betrayed*, has been given several airings. NBC has also shown a local movie on sexual harassment entitled *Kauna's Way*.

Presently, NBC has an informal policy of not airing programming it considers highly violent or sexually-explicit until after the hour of 22h00. A Selection Committee, consisting of several members of the public from varying backgrounds, as well as representatives of NBC and government, uses a set of written guidelines to aid them in deciding whether proposed programming is suitable for the air. The guidelines stipulate that affordability, public demand, and educative value are to be considered. Mureko also reports that where the victims of violence in proposed programming are children or

women, the Selection Committee will often withhold its approval. When time and facilities permit, the Selection Committee views the entirety of a film or an episode of a television series before rendering its decisions. These decisions, however, are often made after viewing only promotional material for the proposed programming, or reading a description provided by the producer. Scripts are sometimes read in advance.

As any NBC viewer will be aware, NBC sometimes warns viewers that a forthcoming programme may contain material that is unsuitable for sensitive viewers. Any warnings regarding the suitability for younger or sensitive viewers of purchased films, as given by these films' producers, are informally taken into account by NBC in issuing its own warnings prior to airing. Another important deciding factor in issuing such warnings is the judgement of whichever of NBC's directors is on duty when the film is selected for airing. One problem with this system is that viewers who tune in after the programme has started will miss out on these cautions.

In the U.S., ratings are displayed before *and during* all shows, indicating that they are designed for children, that they are suitable for general viewing, that parental guidance is advised, that viewers are strongly cautioned, or that the program is suitable only for mature audiences. These basic ratings are further developed with specific warnings of sex, violence, nudity, or strong language contained in the program. These measures give parents the option of restricting their child's viewing in an appropriate way. NBC could further its stated mission, by creating a more detailed ratings system along the lines of those presently used to rate movies shown in theatres.

The South African regulatory body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), is proposing an amendment to the current code which regulates programming content. Among other changes, the IBA proposes that depictions of violence, coarse language, and/or sexually-explicit behaviour intended for adult viewers, be shown only between the hours of 21h00 and 05h00. This prohibition will include promotional material and music videos, but not news or religious broadcasts. The IBA states that, in children's programming, violence is only to be portrayed if it is "essential to the development of a character and plot."

Positive standards can also be utilised. Mureko reports that NBC's unwritten policy is to show either a half or full hour of children's programming at 17h00 each weekday. While this is laudable, the commitment to children's educational programming could be expanded.

Of course, there is much that parents can do to limit their children's exposure to television, and particularly to television violence. Some tips for concerned parents:

(1) *Set house rules.* Experts recommend that children should not watch more than two hours of television per day. Make it clear that other activities, such as homework or "family time", take priority over television. Set an example for your child by restricting your own television viewing.

(2) *Help your child plan which programs she will watch that day.* This will help your child learn to make decisions and establish priorities. Some parents institute a "point system", where a child is permitted 40 points of television viewing a day. Educational programs, like *Sesame Street*, have a low point score, and violent cartoons have a high point score. Children quickly learn which has more entertainment value.

(3) *Suggest other fun activities,* such as sports, games, and hobbies. Encourage your child to see television as one activity among many that are entertaining.

(4) *Know what your child is watching.* Watch programs with him and use these programs to encourage discussion on social issues. Pay attention to advertisements and the messages they send. If you see something that conflicts with your family's values, point it out and explain to your child why it offends you. If violence is portrayed, ask your child to think of ways the situation could have been solved without violence. Talk about how characters in shows make friends and maintain relationships. This makes television viewing a more educational experience.

Some ideas to raise public awareness of the need to reduce children's exposure to television violence:

(1) *Challenge the public to a "Pull the Plug Week":* Parents and children would not watch any television for a week, and learn to spend time together doing other constructive activities

(2) *Challenge video rental stores to create "Family Viewing" categories* which feature films suitable for the whole family, and award a prize for the store with the best such category.

(3) *Boycott products which use offensive, violent advertising,* and complain to those companies.

(4) *Telephone or write to NBC* and other broadcasters to give your opinion on programmes they air.

(5) *Call for regulatory measures* which will require the use of ratings and warnings by all stations broadcasting in Namibia.

Television violence may well be a contributing cause to actual violence in Namibia. With the co-operation of parents, broadcasters, and the public at large, we can reduce violence on national television.

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