Violence on TV: Analysis of Children´s Programming

Violencia en televisión: análisis de la programación en horario infantil

ABSTRACT
The concept of Public Service has recently undergone a big transformation. After losing its educational and positive connotations, what remains now is its negative dimension: child protection. The present article shows the first results of exhaustive and longitudinal research of the television content broadcast during the special protection hours. Attention has been paid to violence infractions. With the classic methodology for this type of content research, we analysed over 8,100 hours of visual work and codification. The results offer data from a comparative description of infractions on every network: programmes, people involved in violent acts, period of time and so on. It also shed some light on the evolution of television content over the last four years from a comparative perspective. The article concludes with the resulting data showing how during the last two years, with a stricter self selection of content by networks, the level of infractions has not diminished, and violence is still used by networks to increase their audience share. The final remark is that it seems as if TV channels are victims of their own behaviour when making a choice of content selection. The highest number of infractions are found, in all networks, either public or private, in the programming with which they identify.

RESUMEN
Acceptando que el concepto de servicio público ha sufrido una gran transformación en estos últimos años, que ha perdido su contenido positivo-educativo y que sólo resiste su dimensión «negativa» de protección a la infancia, el presente trabajo presenta los primeros resultados de un estudio exhaustivo y longitudinal de los contenidos televisivos en horarios de protección infantil. La metodología utilizada ha sido la propia de los estudios sobre el contenido: visionado (más de 8.100 horas) codificación y encuadre en las categorías formalizadas para su posterior tratamiento. Los resultados obtenidos, al margen de una descripción comparativa de infracciones por cadenas, franjas horarias, programas, sujetos participantes y sujetos involucrados desde el pleno de la violencia, muestran una radiografía del marco televisivo dentro del horario especialmente protegido, a partir de un seguimiento de los incumplimientos de Código de Autorregulación pactado entre las cadenas. Se presta una especial atención a los volúmenes y modalidades de violencia a la que son expuestos los niños. Esta investigación pone de relieve que, desgraciadamente, a pesar de que se detecta una cierta mejora en los dos últimos años, la protección a la infancia es aún muy deficiente. Nuestra conclusión es que las cadenas son víctimas de la estructura programática por la que optan, toda vez que el mayor nivel de incumplimientos se concentra en las apuestas específicas de su programación diferencial.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE
Childhood, television, violence, self-regulation, infractions, special schedule protection.
Infancia, televisión, violencia, vulneraciones, autorregulación, horario especialmente protegido.

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1. Introduction: Public service and content analysis methodology

Although the principles of public service often characterize public broadcasters, specially in Europe, we should not forget that even commercial television, early established in U.S. and Latin America, was not completely alien to them (Auferheide, 1999). In fact, the philosophy of public service was the implicit basis of an important current in broadcast television content analysis, creating a framework, vague but effective, that made it possible to study the extent to which the different broadcasters met certain obligations of political fairness, or if they were promoting values that could be considered universal.

Lasswell had formulated his famous paradigm (who says what, on which channel, to whom and with what effect), which served as a guide for the establishment of different research areas for the analysis of control (who), content analysis (what), provider analysis (which channel), audience analysis (to whom), and analysis of the effect (with what effect). No wonder this happened in the 70s, just when the idea of public service began to crumble (television had already disappointed the global elites), when it seemed that content, as a research technique, was in its heyday.

The methodologies of Lasswell for the analysis of «what» were applied to all types of television contents to determine precisely the extent to which they served to social integration, and it was believed that the researchers would be able to correct the course the medium seemed to have taken. At that time content analysis was expanded to all types of text information, moving from its usual informative territory, to entertainment and, in particular, to the series. While it was in 1972 that Katzman published his famous article «Television Soap Operas: What’s Been Going on Anyway» in the «Public Opinion Quarterly» where he noted that, despite the magnitude of this phenomenon, there was no published research on television series (1972: 200-212), ten years later Allen cited a bibliography (1985:30) in which he documented up to 76 separate investigations on the subject, most of them conventional content analyses.

It seemed at the time that content analysis would make it possible to validate public service and measure social integration (or ideological control) in an unbiased, reproducible way.

However, content analysis was very soon discredited. The reason was that the very concept of «content» presupposed (implicitly) the existence of a clearly established «what» that could be «injected» into the audience. In opposition to a hypothetical «Hypodermic Theory» that, as is recognized today, did never exist, as it was never defined theoretically nor supported by empirical research (Wolf, 1994: 33), a new paradigm of limited impact had already been legitimized. It had been first formulated in 1948, in the «two step flow» theories in The People’s Choice (Lazarsfeld and the Bureau of Applied Social Research) and in the principles of exposure, perception and selective retention.

Given the primacy of the paradigm of the Bureau, we can say that, despite the rhetoric of Lasswell and the volume of research, content analysis was always considered a subordinate technique. Although not everyone agreed (especially the theorists of the ‘Cultivation Theory’), the Bureau stated that content is modified on its way from sender to receiver (from a selective exposure to the relentless filter of an opinion leader) and, therefore, becoming irrelevant. This forced everyone (theorists of the ‘Powerful Effects theory’ included) to a gradual move of the research on public service towards the ‘Theory of Effects’.

However, this shift in research interests was not the last. Some results seemed convincing, especially in areas where boundaries were relatively easy to define, as for example, the relationship between violence and children’s behaviour. In 1960 Lovaas studied several cohorts of children exposed to violent and non-violent audiovisual situations and concluded that children who had watched the violent material showed afterwards a slightly more violent attitude than the rest.

The ambitious 1960-1982 «Long term effects of media» of Eron and Rovell seemed to provide more conclusive results. However, studies can be found like «Use of Enchantment: The Meaning and The Importance of Fairy Tales» by Bruno Bettelheim 1970 that concluded that children have a natural attraction to violence, while for others «the television could become an anxiety-generating element» (Gordo 1999: 203).

Research continued without conclusive results (Buckingham, 2006: 468-486), and that «correlation between viewed violence and immoral behaviour... has never been scientifically proven» (Jacquinot-Dalauay, 2002: 29) was already noted in the Kefauver report of 1956. (Perez Ornua, 2006: 166).

The difficulties met by scholars studying effects did not help to restore the status of content analysis. The other line of attack, much more dangerous than the study of effects, came from semiology.

Let us remember the well known warning by Eco (1979: 218): «That which we call message is, in fact,
text where messages converge that are based on different codes. Therefore, different messages coexist in the same text. The challenge posed by Eco, by making a reference to the multiple meanings of texts, cast some doubts on the study of content but opened a vast research field for the study of the audience.

From its inception the Bureau of Applied Social Research in New York had been studying in depth the reasons for media appeal taking into account the motives given by the viewers. But it will only be after some time that the paradigm of the uses and gratifications be formalized. To McQuail and Windahl, the critical moment occurred when the article of Blumm and Katz, «The uses of mass communication», was published. In the seventies, the American sociology of the audience was focused on the preferences and responses of media consumers: the audience as an active agent that makes motivated decisions (Windahal McQuail, 1997), known to our authors as the «theory of the unavoidable» (Quintana, 2005: 245).

Semiotics had already highlighted the critical importance of the dynamics of meaning. This was the change of paradigm that gave an impulse to phenomenological sociology, paving the way to the recognition that the media did provide cognitive frameworks and that media culture was an important symbolic universe on its own. The ground was prepared, as Wolf (97: 255) says, for the problem of the effects to evolve into that of the meanings and interpretations. It was then that Stuart Hall, who in the late seventies was the director of the Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies, became the key person in the transition from generic cultural analyses to empirical studies of specific audiences. This paradigm shift implied that Eco’s semiotic reflection transcended the purely semiotic redefining text as a procedural phenomenon (Silverstone, 1997: 237). This was the beginning of the now undisputed domination of Cultural Studies in media research and the virtual disappearance of content analysis as a valuable technique.

When cultural practices are being studied, the desire to demonstrate, in the strict scientific sense of the term (i.e., isolating the object, identifying and controlling the units involved and to get results, reproducible cause and effect relationships, etc.), encounters difficulties that are practically insurmountable despite the necessary discipline imposed by the method (Menor, 2009: 89-109). If this is the case, any extrapolation is always suspected and the possibility that the investigation of cultural practices may contribute to any reflection about the media in today’s society is, to say the least, problematic.

Jensen and Rosengren believe that a serious methodological problem in these studies is that their results are not easily reproducible thus limiting the possibility of generalizing their results (1998: 353). Wolf emphasized the inherent difficulties in the investigation of users of the media: its limited possibilities of extending and generalizing the results and the bias derived from the mere presence of the researcher (1994: 173-7). He suggested that for it to be useful in the study of the

One of the most surprising and conclusive results of this research is that, regardless of channel, daytime and type of program, when in-house productions are broadcast in children’s protection hours, low levels of violence and a high degree of respect for the right values are found. This is proof of the existing sensitivity in the audiovisual sector and that hypothetical generic protection measures of protection to in-house production could have a positive outcome.

processes of construction of social representations, studies of communication practices should be limited (except for a merely descriptive quantitative) to the analysis of cases.

The problem with is that, even with the required precautions, lowering the level of the analysis makes the results of many studies not only irrelevant but also unrepeatable; most of the micro-observations on every interaction of the public with the media may be of a high pragmatic value (and therefore usually carried out within a market research scope) but of a small theoretical importance, providing little help for a true understanding of macro-social processes.

It is at this point that we want to confirm the validity of content analysis. It is true that the meaning of a text cannot be taken for granted without considering the codes, the audiences decoding these codes and their possible effects. However, when dealing with objects lying within well defined boundaries and of small polysemy, the power of content analysis to inves-
tigate trends (and not only to studies of independent, isolated cases) is still enormous. Moreover, when considering the difficulties experienced by other methods, it leads to results that are easily reproducible and, therefore, admitting generalization.

When, as is the case at present, the research of effects remain stalled by the difficulties in isolating the variables involved and cultural analyses seem to be doomed to a certain degree of irreproducibility (if not of irrelevance), many of the old criticisms now seem somewhat unfair. Although it is true that content is polysemic, its rigorous analysis using formalized categories makes possible something that is very important: obtaining quantitative data (be they time series, types of content, channels, etc.) that are comparable and repeatable.

It is precisely by partitioning the too broad concept of public service and by narrowing and formalising its scope, with the analysis of content harmful to children in mind, that the use of content analysis becomes an accurate technique for the assessment of the social and audiovisual reality in Spain.

2. Research. Materials and methods: Protection of children in television

The regulation of television content and child protection in the U.S. is in a phase of extreme confusion. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 and its de-regulatory national policy framework, by liberalizing the audiovisual policy, has made of the protection of children the only real rule for commercial public service. If there is anything of the old philosophy of public service that survives it is precisely the protection of children, if not in a positive sense, by actively promoting those values that children should hold, doing it at least in a negative sense, trying to prevent content deemed harmful for them.

The U.S. Federal Communication Commission has set a very clear rule: television must, at least, avoid harmful and disruptive influences. Although a negative approach, it enjoys very strong support. Thus, in April 2009, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark decision: with five votes in favour and four against, the agency determined that television broadcasting of a single insult was subject to punishment. It did not matter whether it was Bono, U2, overcome with emotion when presented an award: «This is really fucking brilliant!» If the FCC decides that a word does affect the development of the children who may be watching, no excuses will be accepted. The broadcaster must accept the decision and pay the fine it is imposed.

As Pérez-Ugena notes (2008:58), in Spain fear of censorship is the reason why the principle of freedom of expression almost always prevails over any simple, negative purpose to avoid harmful content. We are in a «tricky position» (Sopena, 2008: 120) because an independent body does not exist that can attest insults as such or even violent action. The Television Without Frontiers Directive (Directive 25/1994) does not explicitly contemplate as an infraction the use of indecent or offensive language in television programmes, but it does include in his famous article 17 a specific chapter devoted to the protection of minors.

In all European countries some kind of audiovisual Regulatory Board exists to oversee the protection of children. In Spain, however, television networks have successfully managed to resist external controls. Instead, and after the social scandal that resulted from the hundreds of hours of violent content in children’s prime time that, usually in the form of talk shows, were broadcast after the death of Carmina Ordoñez, television networks, under pressure from the Government, felt obliged to comply with a Code of Self-regulation they had imposed upon themselves and of which they would officially declare «it is not easy to apply» (Reig, 2005: 68).

2.1. Working material: analysis, monitoring and evaluation of the Agreement

The research project presented in this article is a consequence of the Code of Self-regulation which is a testimony of social responsibility (Ruiz 2008:116). Its objective was to monitor the progress of the self-regulation from an external, objective and disinterested body. The Ministry of Communication signed an agreement with the Universidad Rey Juan Carlos, then under the direction of the late Richard Pérez-Amat, the true architect of the project. The investigation was launched in early 2006 and ended in the first quarter of 2009.

All the content broadcast in daytime deemed of enhanced protection by the networks that had signed the Code of Self-regulation (Spanish television TVE 1, Antena 3, Cuatro, Tele 5 and La Sexta) was considered for this study. A selection was made of content unsuitable for children where the subject had to do with violence. Coded dayparts included, Monday through Friday, mornings from 08:00 to 09:00 and afternoons from 17:00 to 20:00 hours.

A model was designed of classification criteria for violations in accordance with their severity level defined as: A (very serious), B (severe) or C (mild). The areas in which violations were detected are: newscasts, cartoons, series and soap operas, magazines, society news, contests, films and advertisements.
The parameters established in the Code of Self-regulation were monitored to identify violations and to prepare audit reports with the following ‘inputs’: content of the infringement with an exhaustive description of it, when it occurred: exact minute and second, environmental typology surrounding the infringement, television programme and channel where it was broadcast and its severity level classification.

A rigorous protocol designed so as to have a uniform data collection system was essential to the consistency and objectivity of this work. A system of rotations was also established in the viewing process. A percentage of viewing (10%) was subjected to verification by all members of the group prior to the start. The research teams monitored four months of national programming and were replaced after a small overlap period to ensure the homogeneity of criteria.

The main objective of this project was to identify possible breaches of the Code of Self-Regulation, so as to have a separate source, independent of the reports issued by the Joint Monitoring Commission that «must publish an annual report on the compliance with the code» (Walzer 2008: 18). An academic research with objectives that went beyond the requirements associated to the compliance of the Code was also launched.

Thus, a classification was established according to the type of program (newscasts, national series, international fiction, soap opera, humour, cartoons and children’s, etc.). The actions that were considered violent were subjected to further coding. In every violent action attackers and victims were identified. Both the attacker and the victim were analysed and assigned a type (adult, young, minor, policeman, fantasy character, etc...). The definitions of activity and passivity in the course of action, following Greimas, had already been applied to the analysis of contents in television newscasts by Garcia, Menor and Perales (1982), but in the course of the investigation they were reformulated for their application in the area of entertainment.

3. Global results of the analysis of violent content

The results presented below correspond to a survey of the television channels TVE1, Antena 3, Cuatro, Tele 5 and La Sexta carried out in 2006, 2007, 2008 and 2009.

In the last three years daily infractions in private channels outnumbered those in Televisión Española (TVE1) where, in 2007 and 2009, a significant reduction took place. A comparison of private channels shows a clear difference between the traditional ones (Tele 5 and Antena 3) and those created in recent years to target a young urban audience and which, by far, are the ones having the worst data in terms of number of infractions.

Noteworthy in this regard is the downward trend of Antena 3. Although this trend is present in all the channels considered, it is in Antena 3 where the descent is more pronounced and steady. Violations have been classified into three levels (A, B and C) depending on their severity, type C being the ones considered «mild» and type A being those considered severe. In the classification procedure different variables have been considered, such as: context, tone, degree of realism with which the action is shown, presentation of the violent act as positive or negative, etc.

The Code of Self-regulation distinguishes between an early morning daypart (8:00am to 9:00am) and one in the evening (from 17:00 to 20:00). Next table shows the number of infractions recorded within those dayparts per hour of broadcasting over the period of analysis. Improvements are observed in both morning and afternoon time slots. Note (Table 4) that Cuatro concentrates almost all its infractions in the morning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Viewing Days</th>
<th>Viewing time (hrs) /Network</th>
<th>Total Beijing time (hrs)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>636</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>144</td>
<td>576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>248</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>1,536</td>
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Table 1. Viewed material. Days and hours 2006-09.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Registered infractions (absolute data)</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2026</td>
<td>1909</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>535</td>
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</table>

Table 2. Total number of registered infractions. Exclusive subject: Violence.

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TVE1</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>1.08</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>0.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antena 3</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>2.92</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuatro</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>3.02</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tele 5</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>1.79</td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Sexta</td>
<td>1.92</td>
<td>4.12</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>2.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Breakdown of daily infractions per broadcaster. Exclusive subject: Violence.
3.1. Comparison of broadcasters by programme type

Program type is by far the most enlightening variable considered in the study. In fact it is the programming schedules what explains the different levels of compliance with the Code and their evolution over time.

Self-promotions are a type of content on which channels have a high degree of operational control and great flexibility in their schedule. This program type allowed all networks to experience clear improvements soon after the Code of Self-regulation came into force, particularly since 2008.

Given the number of films in the catalogues of the different networks, plenty of films are available that are appropriate for dayparts requiring child protection. In them the number of violations is very low. Unfortunately few films are programmed in these dayparts.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 1. Distribution of infractions by channel and severity level.

Cartoons are the type of content with greater variability. Unfortunately there is a trend toward content progressively vulgar, violent and somewhat oriented to adults. The programming of series such as Sin Chan produces a very strong impact on results. Cuatro is the most affected channel in the period analysed.

Foreign fiction (other than soap opera) is also very variable, but it tends to have a negative impact. The kind of violent American series programmed by La Sexta, especially since 2007, largely explains their poor performance.

News programmes received special treatment because of the importance that contextual factors and the right to information have in their case. Although less strict criteria were applied, it was impossible to ignore the highly violent content in news updates in Tele 5 and Antena 3.

It is a curious fact that most complaints about television content in dayparts under children protection point to magazines. We have already commented that it was precisely the controversy that arose about their monographs on the death of Carmina Ordóñez by a drug overdose that led to the Code of Self-regulation being launched. New controversies come up periodically on celebrities or on reality show participants. At the time of writing this article, heated debates on the lack of protection from the media experienced by the daughter of Belen Esteban are broadcast. However and contrary to appearances, magazines have made, almost from the start, an enormous effort to adapt to the rules, most noticeably in 2008. Tele 5 is the network with by far the lowest level of compliance.

But it is in the national series scheduled for the afternoons where the lowest levels of infringement are found. It is interesting to note that during the period under study many national series were broadcast of types ranging from the historical fiction soap operas in TVE-1 to the comedies of La Sexta. In all cases, producers and networks show remarkably high standards of care and sensitivity towards children considering that the plots are extremely varied.

In the end networks are the victims of the programming structure they choose. Worst case non-compliances in TVE-1 are due to South American soap operas, in Cuatro to its cartoons, in Tele 5 to its newscasts and magazines and in La Sexta to its foreign series.

4. Conclusions and discussion

Although the investigation has not finished yet, it is possible to present here some conclusions as subjects for a further discussion. The most important is that the high levels of infringements found are unacceptable. And also that special attention should be paid to programmes that, as in the case of cartoons, although with children as their intended audience, have

<table>
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<th>TVE 1</th>
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<td>M</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>0.48</td>
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<td>0.19</td>
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<td>2008</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>1.27</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.32</td>
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Table 4. Number of infractions per hour in morning (M) and evening (E) dayparts.
an alarming number of violations of the code.

Even though magazines in talk-show format are considered as potentially harmful for children when in daytimes under children’s protection, available data prove that they are not the main problem. The violence in the American series and the positive tone of the national series in the afternoon are also little known facts but clear and relevant. Although there have been improvements, private broadcasters (and especially new emerging channels) have the lowest levels of compliance.

Ongoing research provides some clues about the types of actors/roles especially associated with violence as well as powerful indications about ‘politically correct’ contents that seem to serve as excuses for the introduction of unacceptable behaviour. This is what we call “positivation of conflict”, a line of work that is proving very fruitful. However, given the complexity of this kind of analysis, its practical application is still pending.

It is clear that the concept of public service has undergone a major transformation in recent years. Having lost its positive educational content, only its “negative” child protection dimension remains. This research shows that, unfortunately, not even this limited dimension is fulfilled.

To bring back a positive approach, a correct audiovisual literacy of children should be encouraged, as Sánchez-Carrero (2008a) points out, that included media related subjects as part of the curriculum (2008b: 154), ditto for the use of parental guides as proposed by Marta Lazo (2006: 211) and, finally, avoid concepts such as telephilia and telephobia (2007). And all this should happen while domestic production gets full support.

One of the most surprising and conclusive results of this research is that, regardless of channel, daytime and type of program, when in-house productions are broadcast in children’s protection hours, low levels of violence and a high degree of respect for the right values are found. This is proof of the existing sensitivity in the audiovisual sector and that hypothetical generic protection measures of protection to in-house production could have a positive outcome.

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Table 7. Program Types: infringements per year and daytime: SP=Self Promotion, F=Film, C=Cartoon, FF=Foreign Fiction, N=Newscasts, M=Magazines, DS=Domestic Series, SO=Soap Opera, T=Trailer.

levisivas y su impacto en las conciencias. Comunicar, 18; 27-33.