Research Methods Proposal

The topic I wish to research is violence in mass media and the effects on children. In today’s world, children are constantly watching television because it’s a way of life. Television is simply another factor in the growth stages of a child’s life and he/she may experience things he/she views differently from other children. Violence has crawled into the television more and more over the years but we certainly don’t see children backing away from the TV. That’s because children have become accustomed to witnessing acts of violence. As informed citizens, we should be aware of violence in mass media and the harmful effects that it can have on children.

My objective is to inform the public about the detrimental effects of violent programming on children. It is my hope that I can convey to people how this type of programming interferes with the day to day lives of children. Obviously this may not affect every child, but it does affect a certain percentage. I realize that there is a vast quantity of research that has been performed in this area (violence in mass media and the effects on children) but I’m more interested in specific areas such as children’s programming rather than news programs or movies. I also want to pose the question of “how do violent programs early in childhood affect children in the later stages of their lives.” This is an important topic that needs to be addressed in today’s world of increased technology and TV viewers. Hypothesis 1: children will be more violent later in life as a result of watching violent programming during their childhood. The Independent Variable is viewing violent programming while the Dependent Variable is violence by children later in life.
I see this study as an important responsibility that I should take. I have realized that as I have grown older, it seems violence within mass media has increased immensely. I can recall certain instances of watching violent programming when I was a child. Now I certainly didn’t think anything of it at the time, but I guess you start to pay attention to those things when you witness your younger brothers during their childhood. I have two brothers, one who is seven, and another who is only one. I have noticed Karsten, who is seven, and how he watches violent programming and his mannerisms during the programs and after. I know firsthand how rambunctious and violent he can act during and after watching television. Being an electronic media/broadcasting major, I see this as my responsibility to inform the public how these types of programs affect children and what we can do as informed citizens, parents, friends, etc. to limit this type of exposure. If these groups of people do not take upon the responsibility of limiting this type of exposure to violence, the cycle will only continue with more and more children being subject to violence on television. To make a change in the amount of violent content on television, we have to address this issue as soon as possible.

As I have previously mentioned, a lot of research has been performed dealing with media violence and the effects on children. I have found other reports performed by additional researchers and included a few of them as background information for my study. What follows is a brief summation of each of these reports.

Often at times, when children watch television, they attempt to imitate what they see. Media violence promotes aggressiveness in a variety of ways, the most readily observable of which is through imitation (Cantor & Wilson, 2003). Much psychological research shows that children learn to perform new activities from observing others…and
children often imitate aggressive models seen on TV or in movies (Cantor & Wilson, 2003). Children learn by what they see and hear. If they’re presented with violence, they will ultimately act in ways that display those same mannerisms and actions.

When children are exposed to violence on television, how do they come to terms of what is real when looking at violent behavior? Some researchers believe that children don’t have the mental capacity to distinguish reality in violence. Viewing violence in television certainly doesn’t help in teaching children what’s real and what’s not real. Prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life (Albiniak, 2000). With that being said, children may not realize the harmful effects of their actions. If they don’t come to terms with reality as they grow older, this could lead to dangerous teenagers and young adults by the time they reach their adolescence.

Dr. L. Rowell Huesmann and his associates concluded a 15-year longitudinal study of 329 youth. His studies found that children's viewing of violent TV shows, their identification with aggressive same-sex TV characters, and their perceptions that TV violence is realistic are all linked to later aggression as young adults, for both males and females (Huesmann, Moise-Titus, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). The interesting aspect of his research was that these findings hold true for any child from any family, regardless of the child's initial aggression levels, intellectual capabilities, social status as measured by parents’ education or occupation, parents’ aggressiveness, or the mother's and father's parenting style. Again we see how viewing violence early in life can lead to increased violence, or aggressiveness, later in life.
The American Psychiatric Association issued a statement advocating for a significant decrease in violent programming on network and cable television. In 1996, the National Television Violence Study examined the most extensive body of television programming ever collected for the purpose of content analysis (The Problem, 2005, ¶ 4). The study found that the majority of all entertainment programming contains violence. The study also found that the typical American child watches 28 hours of television a week, and by the age of 18 will have seen 16,000 simulated murders and 200,000 acts of violence (The Problem, 2005, ¶ 2). This is a startling statistic and the American Psychiatric Association points out that we should take actions to limit children’s exposure to this amount of violence.

Often at times broadcasting companies realize they have an ethical obligation to broadcast public service announcements in order to confront the issue of violence in their programming. Sometimes they use celebrities to speak out against violence. Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill studied 100 PSAs and found many of them used celebrities to speak out against violence but said little or nothing about the consequences of violent behavior (PSAs, 1997). For example, imagine hearing a PSA from Bruce Willis speaking about the wrongs of violence just after you watched his latest “Die Hard” movie. That seems a bit ironic and children pick up on that as well, meaning many PSA’s go ignored. So while broadcasting companies continue to spend money in their attempt to help the situation, in all reality it could just be a wasted effort if they don’t properly address the issue.

The violence seen on children’s television is often of a special, stylized type. (Sege & Dietz, 1994). Violence on television is frequent, inconsequential, effective, and
rewarded (Sege & Dietz, 1994). It is practiced as often by the heroes as by the villains. Violence ends confrontations quickly and effectively, without a need for patience, negotiation, and compromise. Furthermore, television rarely shows the lingering psychological and physical effects of violence (Sege & Dietz, 1994). In short, televised violence effectively solves problems and resolves conflicts, receives social affirmation, and rarely causes pain or suffering (Sege & Dietz, 1994). We seem to be teaching children the wrong way to deal with their problems. This research points out that if children continue to believe what they see as they grow older, it will lead to increased violence in their lives.

Dr. Leonard Eron has found a cycle of aggression, which he believes perpetuates itself. Watching violence on television, says Eron, leads to heightened aggressiveness, which in turn leads to more violence-viewing on TV. “Children who behave aggressively are less popular--and, perhaps because their relations with their peers tend to be unsatisfying, less popular children watch more television and therefore view more violence,” (Eron, 1992). From TV, they learn new techniques of aggression, which makes them even less popular with their peers, which in turn drives them back to TV (Eron, 1992). Poor academic performance also drives them deeper into TV violence, Eron found. Those who fail in school watch more TV, which isolates them from their peers and gives them less time to work for academic success (Eron, 1992). The cycle of aggression, academic failure, social failure, and violence-viewing is so tightly bound that, sadly, it perpetuates itself (Eron, 1992).

Recently the American Psychological Association gathered research information discussing violence on television. Studies by George Gerbner, Ph.D., at the University of
Pennsylvania, have shown that children’s TV shows contain about 20 violent acts each hour and also that children who watch a lot of television are more likely to think that the world is a mean and dangerous place (Violence, 2005). Children often behave differently after they’ve been watching violent programs on TV. In one study done at Pennsylvania State University, about 100 preschool children were observed both before and after watching television; some watched cartoons that had a lot of aggressive and violent acts in them, and others watched shows that didn't have any kind of violence (Violence, 1995). The researchers noticed real differences between the kids who watched the violent shows and those who watched nonviolent ones (Violence, 2005). “Children who watch the violent shows, even ‘just funny’ cartoons, were more likely to hit out at their playmates, argue, disobey class rules, leave tasks unfinished, and were less willing to wait for things than those who watched the nonviolent programs,” says Aletha Huston, Ph.D. (Violence, 2005). This research pointed out the effects of violence on children who watch television.

In the movie “Tough Guise”, by Jackson Katz, we see how young boys grow up with the mindset to be violent. When Katz surveyed a few young men and asked them to define what it means to be a man in one word, here were some of the responses: independent, respected, muscular, strong, and tough. Boys learn early-on that being a real man takes on this tough guise. A tough guise is a front that men put up to emphasize toughness, physical strength, and to shield our vulnerability (Katz, 1999). Katz asked where did they get this idea and he pointed straight to mass media. The media helps to construe violent masculinity as a cultural norm. “One of the most important places that they learn it is the powerful and pervasive media system that provides a steady stream of images that define manhood as connected with dominance, power, and control” (Katz,
1999). Here we see how the media has instilled the idea of male dominance in the mind of boys through television. Often at times this comes through violent movies and television programs.

In the movie titled “Teach the Children,” we once again see the effects of television on children. In a 1990 Nielsen Report on children ages 6-11, an average child watches television 26 hours per week (Teach the Children, 1992). Children end up spending more time in front of a TV than time spent in school. By the time they reach the age of 18, they have been in school for 11,000 hours and watched TV for 15,000 hours (Teach the Children, 1992). Jim Henson, the creator of the Muppets, said “television is basically teaching…television teaches a great deal…and it teaches them (children) the world outside of their house.” A lot of what children watch on television is mainly for adults. Most programs watched by children are made for adults, be it America’s Most Wanted or Married with Children. As a result children view violent programming that was intended to be viewed by adults. The 20,000 murders an average child watches by the time he or she is a teenager normalizes violence (Teach the Children, 1992).

As you can see, each different research report only confirms the idea that violence on television affects children in a negative way. If the effects are not observed during their childhood, some effects may result later in their lives. What we have observed is that violence on television gives children a false sense of what’s real, it makes our world seem more violent than it really is, television normalizes violence, and it leads to increased acts of aggression later in life. All of these effects result from too much violence on television and these reports only reaffirm those facts. I believe these reports
give me a basis to focus my research. All of those reports relate to my study. I can pull information from each of these reports when working on my study. I now know what to look for while doing my personal research when I will be looking for the effects of violence in children’s lives.

I will now attempt to define my variables in order to give people an idea of what to look for when we’re talking about violence. I consider violent programming to be programs that contain any of the following: fighting, cursing, blood, theft, murder, rape, parental arguments, domestic violence, acts of aggression, deliberate actions intended to cause injury to people, animals, or non-living objects, war, terrorism, weapons, and more. Violent programming could contain any of this. Obviously other people may view violence in a different way with a different set of words but that’s how I perceive violence and that’s what I’m looking for when measuring violence. I plan on measuring when violence occurs by counting the number of instances that I witness while watching the respected television show. After comparing the results of a few television shows, we could come to the conclusion that certain shows contain more violence than other shows.

When discussing what violence is by children later in life, we must also analyze those same definitions. I believe violence later in life could contain any of the previous words used to describe violence. To measure violence later in life, we have to take a look at the same group of children that I picked for my sample. You could obtain this information of violent activity by looking at school reports, juvenile crime reports, court reports, criminal records, and other documents. If they display any of those violent characteristics, I would count that toward my measurement.
I plan to use random sampling when looking for television shows to sample. I want to focus on shows that run on channels like PBS, Cartoon Network, and Nickelodeon. Using random sampling, we can pull any show from any of these three channels at any time to look for violence. A few specific shows I am interested in looking at is *Dragonball Z* from the Cartoon Network, *Martin Mystery* from Nickelodeon, and *Sesame Street* from PBS. I want to use a stratified sampling method for drawing my sample of children. I want to have an equal number of boys and girls. I also want the sample to be equal as far as race with the same number of white, African American, Asian, and Hispanic children. And in each gender and race, I want to have each social class present with the same number of children. There should be the same number of children from the low, middle, and high social classes. This will be useful when looking for how certain factors such as race, gender, and social class play into the amount of violence present later in life. The sample should contain at least 300 children; each 100 should be a social a class (low, middle, high). Of that 100, each 25 should represent a race. Of that 25, 12 or 13 should be male or female.

I have a few measurement devices that I plan on using to gather information. The first is a mail-out/self administered survey. I would have to mail-out at least 500 surveys and perform two follow-up surveys in order to reach my 60% mark of 300, my original sample size. In this survey I could ask questions about how many hours their child watches television, what types of shows, how violent the child acts after watching the show as compared to before watching the show, what are the child’s mannerisms while not watching violent programming, etc. I could ask all types of questions that could give me results in the surveys. As the children became older, I could send another survey to
those same parents asking how their children were doing and if they observed any violence from the children as they became older. I also want to use the complete observer approach during my participant observation. During this observation, I could go to the household of the child and observe the child’s actions while watching the violent programming. I could use the same observation method as the child entered adolescence by getting permission to follow the respected child (now almost adult) around and noting their actions. I could look back on previous results from earlier surveys when the children were younger and note whether they were subject to violent programming and how they act now later in life. I could make comparisons as to the amount of violent programming the child watched and whether or not they seemed to be violent later in life.

I would use these two main measuring instruments of surveys and complete observer approach for my research.

I plan on using both qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis. I will use qualitative analysis to explain what types of violence that I witnessed and any other patterns that I may have noticed while gathering data. I will use quantitative analysis to show the number of times certain instances of violence were viewed by children, the number of times violent actions may have occurred as a result of watching the violent programs, etc. I think the quantitative analysis will give me the physical numbers so I can show how many times certain things occur while gathering my research. Both methods of analysis will be vital when I present my final research. I will be able to explain both why and how things were occurring, and the number of times certain things were witnessed.


