

CHAPTER TWO

TELEVISION VIOLENCE:

FRAYING OUR SOCIAL FABRIC

Violence on Television

In our society, violence is simply a symptom, in relation to television, of the inadequacy of television in dealing with real life. It's been an issue since we first had it. If you go back and review the literature, the criticism, and so on you'll find that, from the very beginning, this has been a major issue. . .

. . . television is not life, it is a highly artificial medium, it is deeply biased by the basic use we make of it and we treat it essentially as a merchandising system. . .

It works best in all of its genres when you have visually-identifiable opponents clashing violently, good guys versus bad guys. . . That's why sports, violence, and conflict of all kinds are the ideal programming.

What works on television is news, sports, action drama, the soaps, game shows, and all of those revel in violence of one kind or another. — Jack Gray, President, Writers Guild of Canada¹⁴

A. TELEVISION AND VIDEO VIEWING IN CANADA

According to the 1990 Statistics Canada Family Expenditure Survey, Canadian families spend more on video cassette rentals than they do to go to the movies. The first year this was the case was in 1990, when each family spent an average of \$75 on video cassettes and \$72 to go to the movies. The survey also shows that nearly every home in Canada has at least one television set.¹⁵ The 1992 Statistics Canada Household Facilities Survey reports that 74% of households have access to a VCR; this high penetration rate is up from only 52% in 1988, five years before.¹⁶

However, despite increases in ownership of VCRs, in the rental of videos, in the number of television services offered by conventional, specialty and pay television broadcasters, and in the number of households who subscribe to cable television, Statistics Canada surveys report that the time Canadians spend watching television and videos in their own home is decreasing, especially among children aged 2 to 11. (Television viewing figures include the viewing of television programming and videos).

The high point of the decade was 1984, when Canadians were watching an average of 24 hours per week of television at home. Since then, the trend has been steadily downward, reaching its lowest level in 1991; Canadians now spend an average of 23 hours per week in front of their own home television screens. Children aged 2 to 11 who were watching an average of 21 hours per week are now watching only 19 hours.¹⁷

In 1991, Canadians spent 4% of their overall weekly television viewing time using their VCR (those who use their VCR at least once per week spend four hours watching videos). Statistics for 1991 also show that on average younger Canadians, aged 2 to 17, use the home VCR 14% more than older Canadians.