

## B. VIOLENCE IN TELEVISION PROGRAMMING

Professor Saunders also noted that:

*. . . our definition of what we mean by television violence is problematic. We need to ask what makes an image a violent image. This is a social judgment, which changes over time . . . how do we distinguish what people are watching on prime-time news every night at nine from the violence they see within television police drama? In fact it's interesting because the studies that have been done on children show that children are more frightened by the violence they see on television news than anything they ever see within police shows.<sup>25</sup>*

The media have often been described both as a mirror of society and as agenda-setters. In 1970, the Special Senate Committee on Mass Media issued its report, *The Uncertain Mirror*, in which it took the view that the mass media play an agenda-setting role: "They are not spectators. They control the presentation of the news, and therefore have a vast and perhaps disproportionate say in how our society defines itself."<sup>26</sup>

During our hearings, ACTRA summarized the role of the media with a slightly different accent:

*Often the media are described as mirroring society. We would go a step further. We believe we can do more than reflect. We can illuminate society and its injustices. Our members do this daily as writers, journalists and performers in the natural ethical discourse which accompanies every challenging issue in the production of information and entertainment programming.<sup>27</sup>*

Some people contend that violence in television programming is simply a reflection of violence in society. They argue that it is the role of the mass media to reflect society, including its violence. If this violence was not portrayed, they assert, television would in effect be presenting a distorted picture of society. Others claim that showing an unusually high number of acts of violence on television is in itself a distorted picture of society. In his book *Hollywood Vs. America*, Michael Medved gives the following example drawn from the research literature:

*In their indispensable research project *Watching America* (1991), Stanley Rothmann, Robert Lichter, and Linda Lichter reviewed more than 600 prime-time television shows, analysing TV's portrayal of the society it serves. When it comes to televised presentations of crime and violence, their conclusions are unequivocal: "Our studies show that an evening of prime time puts to shame a night at the station house. Violent crime is far more pervasive on television than in real life, and the disparity widens as the danger increases. For the most serious crime of all, the difference is most dramatic. Since 1955, television characters have been murdered at a rate 1,000 times higher than real-world victims". (sentence underlined by author)<sup>28</sup>*

The importance given to crime in the mass media far outweighs reality. However, the mass media are not always the main source of people's knowledge about crime, law and justice. For example, University of Toronto professor of criminology and sociology, Richard V. Ericson, who has studied the interrelationships between the mass media, crime, law and justice, has found that the