

Reviewing the Acceptability of Violence to Audiences

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INTRODUCTION

This research is part of the BBC's on-going commitment to regular, in-depth audience research, as outlined in "Taste, Standards and the BBC" (June 2009).

An exploration of current public attitudes towards strong and aggressive material was partly prompted by a seeming increased sensitivity on the part of audiences towards violent content, especially in pre-watershed shows – a trend noticed, albeit informally, by the BBC and by the industry regulator, Ofcom.

Research conducted during the Taste and Standards report also reflected a degree of public unease. Violence in society as a whole (rather than as portrayed in the media) emerged as a dominant theme and many respondents in the 2009 study felt they were living in more dangerous times than hitherto. Violence on television was cited as one of top of mind concerns for the respondents in the Taste and Standards research, although that concern lessened considerably when compared with other issues such as violence in console games and sexual content on the internet.

Reviewing the acceptability of violence to audiences is primarily concerned with material on television, films, the internet, console games and other related platforms, especially mobile phones.

No concerns about violent content on radio have been raised during the Taste and Standards research; there were a very small number of remarks about violent lyrics in rap music (echoed in this report too) but in both research projects, this problem was not seen to emanate from or belong to mainstream broadcasters.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the research were to ascertain public attitudes towards violent content on those media platforms outlined above with particular reference to the role of the BBC and to BBC content. The research sought to explore the overall public response to violent content and to examine attitudes and expectations across a range of demographic groups. A wide range of issues were raised and discussed, including expectations of genre (including News), slot, and channel on television and online; the impact of technologies such as the internet and PVRs; scheduling, including the impact of 24-hour rolling news.

The research focused on the following programme genres: drama, both pre and post-watershed; documentaries and social observation documentaries; factual entertainment; news items on television and news online.

The methodology of the research is outlined most fully in the accompanying report by research agency **Blinc**. Briefly, the research was qualitative and conducted across all nations and regions. Groups from rural areas were recruited as well as from urban and larger suburban areas.

Eleven groups of twenty people were recruited and shown thirteen clips from a range of programming, predominantly broadcast by the BBC. The clips were selected to stimulate discussion about particular issues such as editorial judgement, genre, scheduling, expectations etc. All of the clips (selected from some 30 items during two screening sessions) had been the subject of editorial discussion during production, critical comment at the time of broadcast and the majority had provoked strong reactions from audiences when broadcast.

Of these eleven groups, eight were general workshops, two were ethnic minority workshops (Asian and Black British); one group was convened for very frequent online users.

The research project also included three groups dedicated to News output. A selection of clips from news, online, stills and documentary programmes were sourced from a number of outlets and shown in these workshops.

As in the Taste and Standards research, this project included a number of in-depth interviews with young people, aged 11-17 years, under the auspices of teachers and youth workers (whose views were also recorded for research purposes). These discussions took place in both urban and rural areas; they were not clip-led but covered most of the issues which were raised in the main groups.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

All respondents believe the world around them has become a more violent place and this gives them cause for concern.

The substantial majority of respondents did not believe that violence on television was a direct cause of violence in society. However, a minority, especially those in contact with vulnerable youngsters, felt that violent console games and access to strong violent and sexual content on the internet had the potential to adversely affect the behaviour of impressionable or disadvantaged young people.

Many respondents felt they had become increasingly desensitised to violence and that society in general was more desensitised to violence than previously.

Overall, the majority of respondents felt that violent content in the broadcast media was acceptable in terms of volume and levels of intensity.

This acceptance of violent content was due partly to the view of most respondents that they had a personal choice whether or not to view such content on television and their choices relied on expectations informed by scheduling, information, warnings and context. There was also an overwhelming feeling that "life is like that" and television content across the genres reflected the realities of the real world.

There was little, if any, spontaneous concern expressed about violent content on the BBC in any of the genres included in this research. Respondents did not feel that the BBC should be held more accountable than other broadcasters; nevertheless they expect that the BBC will be more responsible in its editorial decisions and its use of strong and violent content on all platforms.

Respondents over the age of 30 felt that fictional violence on television was stronger than it once was.

Respondents across all age groups felt that television content needed to keep pace with film if it was to stay modern and relevant to audiences. Respondents regard movie channels and high quality American imports as direct competition for established broadcasters and more traditional content.

Respondents trusted and valued established documentary series such as BBC1's Panorama and the Dispatches series on Channel Four. Respondents allowed significant licence in the use of strong and violent images to respected strands and to documentaries where the subject matter warranted it.

Violent scenes are enjoyed in post-watershed drama, provided they are integral to the plot and not perceived as gratuitous.

In pre-watershed dramas, especially soap operas, respondents are more concerned about the impact of on-going aggressive behaviour and tone than with the occasional violent scene.

High quality American acquisitions, movie channels and film franchises are increasingly becoming key reference points for younger audiences.

BBC news, on all its platforms, was highly rated and trusted by our respondents.

Some respondents felt BBC News could occasionally push the boundaries in terms of violent images if the story deserved such treatment.

There was no appetite for the BBC to provide more violent images online than they would via their terrestrial and digital platforms.

CONCLUSIONS: VIOLENT CONTENT & THE BBC

"The BBC has got a good reputation and should maintain that by keeping high standards." (Female, 45-54yrs, Leicester)

'The BBC should be more careful than others, they shouldn't be gratuitous, but they also need to be modern.' (Female, 35-45yrs, Manchester)

Overall, there was little, if any, top of the mind concern expressed about violent content on any of the BBC platforms. Respondents felt the world around them was more violent and that they now had access to stronger content than previous generations, but there were no concerns that violent content passed acceptable boundaries on the BBC.

The majority of respondents across all age groups felt the BBC would invariably lose pace with other broadcasters because of its adherence to editorial values and a reluctance to compete with other broadcasters when it came to content which was primarily ratings-driven.

Respondents felt the Corporation would "fall behind the times" in a competitive environment of increasingly hard-edged content. To respondents over the age of 40, this perceived reluctance to chase ratings by the provision of strong content was one of the main reasons they held the BBC in such high esteem.

But for younger respondents, the BBC ran the risk of becoming less relevant in an environment where content and the ability to access content were of far greater importance than the perceived sensibility of the broadcaster. In a non-linear environment, content brands and personalities were of far greater importance than broadcasters and channels.

The under-35 year olds felt the BBC must realise that the Corporation was no longer competing with terrestrial broadcasters but largely with movie channels, online content, quality American imports and the channels that broadcast these acquisitions such as Sky One and FX.

Post-watershed drama on BBC1 is expected to contain some scenes of violence but audiences do not want to see strong violence, especially sexual violence, at the beginning of programmes, immediately after the watershed. Respondents, especially those with younger teenage children, felt that stronger material should be introduced more cautiously into a drama.

Respondents made it clear that programme-makers had to take care with the levels of violence within their dramas. A significant number felt that levels of violence in popular and long-running drama series had increased over the years, although they remained dedicated viewers of these shows.

There is an expectation that crime dramas and thrillers will contain violence but new shows must be aware that greater tolerance for strong material is shown to established shows with characters who have won the trust of viewers. Quality and context are key to the acceptability of violent material in BBC dramas.

Respondents expected occasional scenes of violence in soap operas, particularly at the climax of major storylines. Respondents were mainly concerned with what they perceived to be a constant level of moderately aggressive behaviour and dialogue, especially when enacted by younger characters or those characters with special appeal to younger viewers.

Soap operas carry considerable impact on the moment of transmission. Whilst lower production quality invariably means that few strong scenes have the ability to retain their power post-transmission, programme-makers must not underestimate the ability to shock or influence viewers on broadcast, especially families watching with children.

A number of older respondents who did not like strong content, especially in dramas, felt there was not enough provision for them in the BBC schedules. A minority also felt that the Sunday evening schedule should be markedly more gentle in tone and content to other days of the week.

The BBC's established documentary series are valued and trusted by viewers. They believe that subjects are chosen because they are worthy of investigation rather than as "ratings-winners". Some respondents felt that there should be few limits on strong content within a quality documentary if it served to illustrate the story.

The unease with reality television, first noted in the Taste and Standards research, led a significant number of respondents to judge observational or fly-on-the-wall programmes as reality shows. Respondents were cynical about factual shows with provocative or flippant programme titles and the inclusion of footage of ordinary people behaving badly, even if the motivation behind such programmes was well-intentioned and socially responsible.

Documentaries and factual programmes must be aware of audience sensitivities. Strong images still have the power to be genuinely distressing especially when their subject matter shows the vulnerable and defenceless, including animals as well as humans.

Respondents valued clear and factual news reporting on the BBC, especially when delivered by journalists they recognised and trusted. Older respondents, in particular, felt the BBC had clear editorial principles which they expected to apply to news on all BBC platforms.

It was clear that respondents felt the BBC could and should occasionally present viewers with strong and violent images as long as the story in question deserved such treatment. Respondents felt this was particularly appropriate in familiar stories

such as reports on long-running conflicts; in these cases, respondents felt the need to be occasionally “shaken up” by a news report.

Many respondents, and almost all young male respondents, had sought out strong and violent content online. However, there was no desire or expectation that the BBC should provide more violent images online than they would show on their terrestrial or digital platforms. Respondents did feel that online news stories could be more comprehensive than other bulletins, but that the BBC’s news values should still apply to expanded content.

The BBC brand was valued by all age groups as a trusted provider of content in a world where extreme violent and sexual content was readily available.

1. FICTIONAL VIOLENCE

Violence in television drama was not a top-of-mind issue for our respondents. When asked for examples of images, scenes or stories that had shocked, upset or offended them in the media, none of our respondents throughout the focus groups mentioned a scene, storyline or image from a television drama.

The majority of our respondents showed us that fictional violence in post-watershed drama is increasingly viewed by audiences as pure entertainment. There are a number of reasons for this and one of the most frequently cited causes was the easy access to and consumption of "real violence" on the internet; this has led to perceptible shifts in the way audiences view and contextualise fictional violence.

Movies (both in the cinema and on television) and US drama acquisitions have also significantly changed the way many viewers perceive violence in domestic British content.

Scheduling is a significant part of this experience: at 9pm viewers can choose between a BBC drama series such as *Spooks* or *Waking the Dead* or view an 18-rated film on a digital channel without having to resort to their PVR or even to pin protection. At 8pm, viewers can freely access 15-rated films on dedicated film channels which frequently provide much stronger material than that available on a terrestrial channel such as BBC1 at the same time.

US drama acquisitions have had a profound effect on the tastes of British viewers, especially those under the age of 40. The stylised violence of the iconic series *The Sopranos* and its successors have set new criteria in terms of production values but also in terms of strong violence. British dramas are judged by many viewers alongside these American imports.

Violent material within dramas is generally regarded and enjoyed as a crucial part of the action amongst all but the oldest viewers, as long as it is seen to enhance the storyline and is not gratuitous. A majority of female viewers over 40 are the most avid consumers of police dramas, whodunits and thrillers containing strong and violent scenes.

But most respondents did feel, on reflection, that violence in dramas had gradually intensified over the years without viewers necessarily being aware of quite how strong some material in modern day dramas can be.

Violence in pre-watershed drama carried little conviction when clips were analysed and discussed by our respondents. However, more habitual aggressive behaviour and language was a cause for concern in soap operas, rather than individual violent scenes. Family viewing brought these issues to the fore, with the presence of younger children as a catalyst for discomfort with stronger material and adult themes.

A majority of respondents felt that increasingly strong content in both films and US imports are seen as leading the way and they felt the BBC must keep pace if it is to compete in the area of modern, relevant entertainment.

1.1 POST-WATERSHED DRAMA

This research showed us just how much choice was now available to consumers and what impact respondents perceived this to have on the content made by and for terrestrial broadcasters, in particular, the BBC.

Generally, respondents over 30 felt that television drama now contained stronger material than ever before. There was a belief that some television drama, notably US imports, had “caught up” with cinema but respondents felt there was a need for all TV drama to keep pace with film if it was to have any chance of competing with the cinema and, more importantly, with movie channels available via digital platforms.

“You’ve got to remember that it’s drama. If it’s too ordinary, no one would watch it!” (Female, 18-24yrs)

However, the under-30s felt that most post-watershed television drama held little attraction for them. Their content criteria was based largely on popular movie franchises such as Blade, Scream or the Saw or Hostel series’, all of which contain extreme violence in largely unbelievable, supernatural, comedic or “gross-out” scenarios. Post-watershed television dramas, especially those on channels with broad appeal, such as BBC1, ITV1 and Sky1, were unlikely to appeal to them and were not seen as offering the shared cultural experience of the well-known film franchises.

Many younger respondents were used to watching American series via the internet before they are acquired by British channels. Hence they watch the shows regardless of information such as scheduling, information or warnings.

1.1.1 US IMPORTS AND THE IMPACT OF COOL VIOLENCE

Acquired US crime dramas have also changed the context in which domestic drama is viewed. It is regarded by many as competing for their attention with made-for-television dramas and with films and film channels.

Whilst older respondents cited the impact on their generation of violent cinematic movies, referencing films such as The Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The Godfather and even the 1960s movies of Sam Peckinpah, respondents under the age of 30-35 years old were as likely to reference major TV dramas such as 24 and The Sopranos as material which had had a profound effect on the look and tone of both movies and television content.

These television dramas have become cultural reference points for a younger generation and rank alongside and are judged in the same way as movies in terms of credibility, production values and social influence.

As yet, British broadcasters have not produced shows which compete with the "Cool Violence" which originated with films such as Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* and *Pulp Fiction* and translated to US television dramas such as *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*. The films and, latterly, the television series', show extreme violence as stylised, frequently humorous and re-set the moral compass in which the anti-hero stars operate.

What might appear shocking and extreme to older audiences, is viewed very differently by younger audiences, especially the under-35s. This was encapsulated by the reactions of focus groups to clips featuring strong violence taken from two popular American imports. *Dexter* (ITV1, 10.35pm) is a crime drama featuring a serial killer "hero" who exacts his own brand of vigilante justice on the worst offenders; in the scenario shown to the respondents, *Dexter* tortures a paedophile who has escaped punishment for his crimes.

The other clip was taken from the critically acclaimed US series, *The Wire*, broadcast on BBC2 at 11.15pm. In the scene shown to respondents, two young men beat to death another man – again, a paedophile, as punishment for his crimes.

Not all our respondents were familiar with *Dexter*, but although they found some of the images strong, this clip acted as a promotional trailer for some respondents and they made a point to watch the show after seeing the clip. All but the oldest respondents saw the unreal nature of the content (an avenging serial killer with a daily job as a blood-spatter analyst) as a means of ameliorating the violence – it was obviously a fantasy concept, American, glamorous and therefore could be enjoyed.

The Wire clip elicited more divided responses. Some of the younger viewers were familiar with the series, knew the context of the two killers and felt this was an extreme but acceptable clip. Others were aware of the series but had not watched it and felt the violence was too realistic for comfort – although the American setting made it more acceptable; some also found the context (the murder of a paedophile) went some way to excusing and making acceptable the violence.

Both clips led to a discussion about the different boundaries afforded to high quality American imports by British audiences. Scenes of gore and violence were felt to be stronger in this kind of acquired programming compared to the British equivalents; there was very little complaint from viewers, who knew what they were choosing to watch.

The American setting also helped the acceptability of the clips and of the crime acquisitions genre in general. Some respondents referred to the suspension of disbelief that accompanies a strong US import; they felt it was clearly set in a different society to their own and even though the content might be very realistic, as in the case of *The Wire*, it was less threatening as it took place "over there" in a

society which nearly all respondents believed to be much more violent than our own. Many respondents enjoyed shows such as The Sopranos as they had no echoes with British life and this kind of tough, violent drama could be enjoyed in a “bubble” that is, detached from any real life concerns.

However, the over-65s struggled to comprehend the very nature of this sort of US drama import, especially that of The Wire. To their minds, the clip from The Wire looked like a documentary and many of these respondents were unable to place it within their expectations of dramatic content. The dialogue was difficult to understand, making it even harder for them to interpret why the violence was taking place; and few of the older respondents were aware of the show’s pedigree, leaving them without clues to navigate this content. Many of the older respondents were largely preoccupied with the strong language in the dialogue; this in itself made the clip unacceptable to them:

“They need to shock you these days. They think they need to shock you. That was shocking. I’ve never seen anything like that. I don’t understand why they would show that. The language it was...dreadful.” (Retirement, Female, Newcastle)

Likewise a number of over-65s found the concept and the actions of Dexter to be both confusing and repellent. There was no enjoyment of the violence within the clip, nor did this minority of respondents pick up the visual “clues” of the American-import genre. Earlier and better-known series such as The Sopranos and 24 had bypassed this age group and they were at a loss to see why either The Wire or Dexter would appeal to viewers. This was not a form of drama that they recognised at all and they felt there was no justification for the scenes of violence.

1.1.2 A GENERATIONAL ISSUE

Attitudes towards those dramas, exemplified by The Wire and The Sopranos were polarised. Those under about 40 were keenly aware of the expectations of the genre; often films and even TV series will deliberately “reference” key scenes from iconic films and revise them and reinvent them, with viewers enjoying picking up the visual homage to earlier scenarios.

Moments of violence from Taxi Driver, Reservoir Dogs, Pulp Fiction, The Usual Suspects or even the Scream franchise are replayed within films and television series and are not viewed as hard-hitting violence but as ironic or humorous commentaries – something totally lost on older generations.

Younger generations turn to those television dramas which reflect their sensibilities, although the quality and entertainment criteria for these respondents are markedly different – and often at odds – with the tone and violence thresholds which suit older generations.

Older respondents, often in the 50-65 age group, were more aware of the look, tone and material present in the majority of US imports. Given their knowledge,

they might not choose to watch a series like *The Wire* but they understand the purpose of the series even though they were not its intended audience. For this age group, the key concerns were appropriate scheduling and comprehensive information and warnings to enable them to make a reasonably informed choice.

As outlined above, many of the over-65s could not see the point of this form of strong drama. But some respondents in this age group were intrigued to see a form of drama which was entirely new to them:

(Of The Wire): "That interests me. I didn't realize it was supposed to be so good. When's it on?" (Retirement, Male, Aberdeen)

1.1.3 GOOD COPS AND BAD COPS

The crime drama, whether a traditional "cop" show, a thriller, a forensic series or a whodunit, is the backbone of British post-watershed drama. Whilst the under 30s may by-pass the classic 9pm terrestrial cop drama, for many older viewers, this is heartland viewing.

Our respondents showed a surprising tolerance for violent material within these dramas. Unlike younger viewers, older respondents felt that violence had to earn its place within a drama; that is, it had to enhance the story or move it along, add to the understanding of all those characters involved in the action and, if explicit, there needed to be a reason for the explicitness.

"It wouldn't be a drama without the violence ...because you build up to the violence and how they deal with it as the storyline." (Male, 25-34yrs, Ipswich)

The many respondents in this research who watched "traditional" crime dramas were not looking for glamorised or cool violence, although a number of respondents across different age group enjoyed the humour of *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* (which probably came closest to the style of American imports) and the light-hearted stylishness of shows like *Hustle*.

Women over the age of 40 were the most avid consumers of post-watershed crime dramas and they accepted violence as part of the mix of this sort of show. Respondents enjoyed being occasionally shocked and gave well-loved series license to take them out of their comfort zone when it came to strong images and violent scenes. Violence and brutality were acceptable as long as they were part of a compelling storyline; respondents discussed strong scenes from post-watershed dramas and approved of them because they had enjoyed the episode as a whole and the violence was an acceptable part of the entire film.

1.1.4 WHAT MAKES VIOLENCE ACCEPTABLE?

"That sort of violence doesn't bother me. I watch all those programmes. I really like them." (Female, 55-64yrs, Aberdeen)

A number of themes emerged repeatedly during discussions about violence in mainstream post-watershed drama.

As outlined above, a strong compelling story was the first criteria for viewers – license to shock was readily afforded to “quality drama”, where viewers felt they were watching a drama with high production values and an original and well-plotted storyline. A number of respondents spontaneously mentioned an episode of the BBC1 drama *Spooks*, broadcast in the show’s first series in 2002. Towards the end of the episode – only the second to be broadcast - an attractive young female agent is killed by being plunged head-first into the boiling oil of a deep-fat fryer and then finished off with a bullet to the head.

It was a moment of extreme and totally unexpected violence, which cost the BBC an upheld complaint from the BSC, not for the violent content but for an inadequate pre-transmission warning. But without exception respondents remembered this scene as a moment of classic drama and one that helped establish the series as something exciting, new and acceptable in terms of occasional extreme violence.

Respondents did not object to unexpected moments of violence as long as it was true to the plot, or if it fitted with their understanding of the characters involved. Violence which they felt to be gratuitous, unjustified by plot, action or character, was not enjoyed. However, it was interesting to note that respondents did not cite any specific mainstream crime dramas that they felt were too violent to watch.

A great deal of trust, expectation and familiarity emerged in their discussions about mainstream crime dramas, exemplified by the clips which led the discussion. Even respondents who declared they did not like violence per se would change their opinion when discussing their favourite shows. Personal taste over-rode stated principles and respondents were quick to defend or explain their favourite shows from any perceived criticism by other respondents:

“I saw that episode of [Waking the Dead], if you saw it, you know that ending...it needed that ending, it didn’t seem as shocking [as it did in the group].” (Family, Male, London)

The clip in question, from the long-running BBC1 series *Waking the Dead*, was taken from the denouement of the story and showed, in flashbacks, the brutal rape of a young woman during WWII.

Respondents also saw a clip from the popular ITV1 drama, *Wire in the Blood*, in which the psychologist hero (played by Robson Green) acts out an execution scenario in a dream sequence, which is intercut with the abduction and execution of a young man in “real life”.

Most people agreed the scene from *Waking the Dead* was strong and pushed the boundaries of appropriate violence, but it was felt to be acceptable. The main concern of respondents was that this sort of material should be placed towards the end of an episode rather than at the 9pm beginning.

In most focus groups, those regular viewers of *Waking the Dead* - generally respondents aged 45 and over - continued the discussion beyond the clip; with a sizeable number of dedicated fans voicing their belief that the series now contained more violence than in its early days.

Interestingly, no respondents said they had stopped watching the series even though they felt it had become increasingly violent. Nevertheless the material was on the borderline of acceptability at times and it was clear that some viewers were being forced too far out of their comfort zone when it came to this particular series. The context and quality of the dramas were key factors in deciding whether violent content was acceptable, even if it exceeded the normal levels of viewer comfort.

1.1.5 LEADING MEN AND LEADING LADIES

The clip from *Wire in the Blood* did not arouse as much discussion as *Waking the Dead*. Many respondents felt the violence in the ITV1 show was un-necessarily graphic and a few commented on the rather clumsy characterisation of the villains in this series. However, the over-explicitness of the violence was almost completely off-set by the genuine appeal of Robson Green in the lead role of clinical psychologist Tony Hill. The character of Hill - clever, funny and extremely charming - enabled respondents to minimise any discomfort afforded by boundary-pushing scenes of violence. Respondents felt the drama lacked the production values of *Waking the Dead* and consequently, they felt the violence carried less impact than its BBC counterpart.

In the same vein, a small number of respondents referred to earlier "classic" crime series, *Prime Suspect* and *Cracker*. Both shows contained very strong moments of drama and a few respondents quoted scenes which had particularly affected them. However, Helen Mirren as Jane Tennison in *Prime Suspect* and Robbie Coltrane as Fritz in *Cracker* were strong, sympathetic (although flawed) characters and those respondents who discussed these shows were in agreement that such popular characters made strong violence not only acceptable but memorable.

A few respondents mentioned the feature film *Silence of the Lambs* as a good example of the power exerted by leading characters. The morality of Jodie Foster's FBI character, Clarice Starling, allowed audiences to regard the scenes of strong violence as necessary to the plot; likewise the character of Hannibal Lector was that of a bad man doing occasionally very violent things but for a good cause. The quality acting and the appealing nature of both key characters made the violence acceptable.

1.1.6 DIFFERENT TYPES OF FICTIONAL VIOLENCE

Respondents in our focus groups readily identified different types of fictionalised violence on television. Although people obviously had their own preferences, very few respondents felt any one form of violent content was completely unacceptable.

“True to Life” fictional violence

The most frequently used comment about violent content on television was “life is like that”. Respondents used this phrase or variations on it, to express their lack of concern about strong content in all genres.

One content clip in particular, brought this way of thinking to the fore. Respondents were shown a clip from *The Bill*, taken from the drama’s pre-watershed days in the 8pm slot. The scene showed a policeman being fatally stabbed by a young man; the knifing, the wounds and the dying agonies of the police officer were all shown in detail, including close-ups shots of the victim. The scene carried even more emotional impact as the victim was an established and popular character.

Setting to one side the issue of scheduling (which generally did not arise until much later in the discussion surrounding this clip), the overwhelming majority of respondents felt this clip was justified and should be shown on television as it was an accurate portrayal of knife crime and showed the terrible consequences of carrying a knife. Respondents felt it was a strong scene but accurate and informative, therefore not overly gratuitous. Others went so far as to say that this sort of drama should be shown to teenagers in order to drive home the consequences of knife crime; this thought was extended to gun crime, with a number of urban respondents feeling that similar lessons could be learned via clever handling of fictionalised shootings.

Medical and “Gory” violence

Respondents made it clear that they regarded medical dramas such as *Casualty* and *Holby* as belonging to a specific strand of programming which brought its own expectations and boundaries when it came to explicit images.

This genre was very much a matter of taste and personal sensibility. A very small number of respondents balked at hospital dramas as they were upset by scenes of medical blood and guts and described themselves as being too squeamish to watch. These people had no tolerance for detailed scenes of medical procedures, especially gory operations; some even arguing such scenes were gratuitous, adding nothing to the action as far as they were concerned.

The majority of respondents enjoyed hospital dramas and there was a real fascination with the details of medical procedures and operations (an interest which is reflected in factual programming too). Respondents were conscious that the overriding theme of any medical drama is essentially laudable – the main characters are there to save lives and help people get better, no matter how badly characters might behave along the way. The awareness of the essential “goodness” of a medical drama meant that most respondents had a greater tolerance for violence within individual episodes.

Our focus groups were shown a dramatic clip from a recent episode of *Casualty*, in which a teenage girl is knocked-down by an ambulance. The impact of the collision is clearly shown and heard and a few respondents found the scene fairly shocking.

However, the vast majority of the respondents felt the clip was acceptable and could anticipate the un-folding of the story following the accident.

The very nature of a medical drama allows for violence, whether accidental or deliberate, to be an intrinsic part of storylines. But there are still limits to the audiences' tolerance for strong images and these can sometimes accumulate beyond what is acceptable in the action of a powerful storyline.

1.1.7 PSYCHOLOGICAL VIOLENCE, TENSION AND IMPLIED VIOLENCE

(Of violence in drama thrillers): "That sort doesn't bother me. I watch all those programmes. I really like them." (Retirement, Female, Aberdeen)

Most respondents showed a real enjoyment of dramas with psychological violence at their heart. The classic example of this is the "serial killer" plot which often features at least some scenes of strong violence; but most respondents felt it was the menace, tension and the fear of what might happen that made such dramas memorable and highly entertaining.

Crime fiction, invariably featuring strong violence and multiple killing is always at the top of the best seller lists in Britain; it's hardly surprising that audiences want to see similar material on their television screens. Many of our most popular crime dramas are adaptations of psychological detective books by best selling authors such as PD James, Ian Rankin, Lynda la Plant, Val McDermid, Elizabeth George and Henning Mankel.

The dramas referred to by respondents reflect the broad audience fascination with "evil"; scores of websites are dedicated to discussing the motivation of serial killers featured in shows such as *Waking the Dead* and violent scenes are analysed and compared with other plots featuring similar violence – often comparisons are made with real life killers such as Harold Shipman or the Yorkshire Ripper. The psyche of the serial killer is a seemingly inexhaustible subject for drama, whether in books, on television or at the cinema.

Psychological violence, when well executed on screen, makes a profound impact on audiences. A number of respondents mentioned the *EastEnders* "Little Mo and Trevor" storyline as a plot that had stayed with them because it was psychologically intense – the flashpoints of violence were seen as highlights in the long-running plot.

Not surprisingly, respondents felt that tension was a significant part of any good thriller, regardless of how much violence eventually erupted. Younger respondents enjoyed the heightened tension of movie franchises such as *Scream* where the main point was the tension of who would die next. For most respondents, tension was engendered by a real involvement with the characters; jeopardy, rather than violence, was the point of this kind of drama.

In a world of strong images, there is still an appetite for implied violence. Many respondents enjoyed dramas dominated by tension and which left something to the

imagination. Television was the medium in which implied violence worked best; movie goers expected CGI, realistic make-up and amazing stunts to really bring home violent scenes, anything less might be disappointing on the big screen. On the small screen, less was often more. The clip from *Dexter*, where the action ended just as Dexter brought a saw down on his captive, was thought by most respondents to end at just the right moment. Their imagination supplied the rest of the action and there was a lingering thought that it would be hard for television to show really explicit violence in a genuinely convincing way – few respondents appeared to desire such explicitness anyway.

1.1.8 SEXUAL VIOLENCE

In general discussions, some respondents cited violence towards women and sexual violence in particular as a type of violence that had the most potential to upset or disturb. But respondents also felt that sexual violence was a reality; it was regarded as a fact of life. Hence the vast majority of our respondents did not find scenes of sexual violence objectionable, provided it was an essential part of a dramatic story and did not appear to be gratuitous.

The *Waking the Dead* clip showed a particularly unpleasant rape, made even more dramatic as it was shown in a black and white “flashback” treatment. Some male respondents found it quite difficult to watch but nearly all respondents found the scene to be acceptable in the context of the story, with some respondents vigorously defending the scene.

A few groups, including those who viewed a wider range of clips in helping determine the most effective material for the project, saw a scene from *Wire in the Blood* which also featured sexual violence. A young mother is locked in a filthy dungeon and then forced at gunpoint to have sex with another prisoner whilst her captor looks on.

Some respondents were concerned about the use of sexual violence to titillate viewers but for most this clip was felt to be rather crude but did not cause genuine upset, although some respondents were slightly embarrassed at watching it with others present.

Sexual content of any sort was not as easily discussed as other strong content. It was quickly apparent that respondents in this study were able to discuss violence with frankness and were not embarrassed to say they enjoyed the material; whereas respondents in the *Taste and Standards* research work found it difficult to talk about sexual material.

In this study, sexual violence in a post-watershed drama was seen as part of life. There was no indication that our respondents sought it out but it did not raise the strong reaction which perhaps may have been expected. The main concern for the majority of respondents was that sexual violence should be appropriately scheduled. Respondents felt that in post-watershed dramas starting at 9pm, this kind of strong

content should occur towards the end of the drama rather than at the beginning of the show.

1.1.9 "SUPERNATURAL" VIOLENCE

This project did not show clips of the newly-popular supernatural, horror and vampire dramas but they were mentioned by a number of younger respondents as hugely popular forms of entertainment where violence was expected as an intrinsic part of the action. Films such as the Blade series in the late 1990s proved an unexpected hit and television inevitably followed suit. Younger teenagers and children now follow the books and films of the Twilight series whilst slightly older generations use the internet to access American television imports such as the vampire series True Blood.

CONCLUSIONS: VIOLENCE IN POST-WATERSHED DRAMA

- Younger age groups see violence in post-watershed drama as a matter of pure entertainment. Different genres, crime, thrillers, horror, sci-fi, all provide iconic moments which are shared experiences for dedicated viewers. The violence is often extreme and may occasionally be shocking, but it is seen as something distant, to be enjoyed purely for itself rather than as images that profoundly affect people and can be related to their own lives or as anything that could conceivably happen in real life.
- "Traditions" have sprung up around the different genres; hence a series like The Sopranos is seen to belong to the same tradition as The Godfather or GoodFellas – iconic gangster movies where the hero is understood to be forever on the wrong side of the law and justice adheres to a different set of values to that of normal society.
- The over-65 year olds generally dislike violent content although they made exceptions for certain quality dramas. A number of respondents in this age group felt that television had less to offer them than was previously the case. There was a feeling amongst some of these respondents that even more traditional dramas were too strong for their liking. Their perception was of there being little provision for them on mainstream broadcasting and of being pushed away by material that didn't engage or entertain them.
- Those respondents between 35-65 years of age, were broadly very tolerant of some violence within mainstream dramas, and even felt there was a place for extreme violence. However, this group had specific criteria which needed to be met before strong violence could be considered acceptable to them. Strong violence needed to be accompanied by a good plot and proper character development; it shouldn't be used as a short-cut to create dramatic intensity and it should be used sparingly to create great effect.

- There is clearly an expectation that any post-watershed crime drama or thriller will contain at least some scenes of strong violence, but new dramas still have to be aware that greater tolerance is shown to established shows with characters who have won the trust of viewers.
- Respondents made it clear that programme-makers had to take care with the levels of violence within their dramas. Even a popular and long-running series like *Waking the Dead* was in danger of alienating viewers if the content was too extreme. Some respondents, especially those with younger teenage children, were especially concerned with strong scenes that were placed at the start of 9pm shows; they felt that stronger material should be introduced more cautiously into the drama.
- However, few if any respondents declared they had stopped watching a loved drama if it went too far in terms of acceptable levels of violence.
- Understanding the context of a drama was essential for our respondents to make an assessment of violent content.

1.2 VIOLENCE IN SOAP OPERAS

Almost all our respondents were familiar with soap operas and understood the conventions of the genre. There was an expectation that plot lines would build to a climax, often one featuring violent action. These “big events” were hardly ever a surprise; newspapers and magazines revealed plot lines in advance of transmission and on-air trails left viewers in no doubt that something dramatic was about to happen.

“With EastEnders you do know that on Christmas Day something terrible will happen...you are ready for it...its part of EastEnders”. (Female, 34-45yrs, Ipswich)

Respondents referred to the inevitability of a positive resolution to soap opera storylines; they felt that tragic scenarios tended to occur only when a character was being written out of a series. This sense of moral fairness was very important to the more sensitive viewers.

Some of our respondents were representative of the avid viewers of soap operas; completely au fait with the characters and plot lines and also familiar with the actors engaged in the dramas, knowledgeable about their real lives as well as about the lives of the characters they portray. There is a real sense of engagement with the characters and storylines and many respondents said this was shared by their children, especially the 10-16 year old age group. In many cases, the youngsters, rather than their parents, were the driving force for watching the show.

Respondents were shown a clip from BBC1's EastEnders (8pm) – a lengthy scene where long-suffering wife Tania buries alive her cheating husband Max as punishment for his treatment of her and their children. They were also shown a clip from The Bill (the stabbing scene outlined above), taken from the series when it was an 8pm drama. A “reserve” clip, seen by a small number of groups, was taken from the ITV1 drama, Emmerdale, which transmits at 7pm. This clip showed a prolonged fist fight which took place during a wedding ceremony.

The EastEnders clip tended to provoke laughter or ironic acknowledgement. Many respondents remembered it and had watched it on transmission. Any impact that had been felt on transmission was not sustained at a later viewing. Younger respondents were more open about their enjoyment of such a dramatic storyline; older respondents were more likely to think it foolish; no one felt it was violent although a few felt the thought of being buried alive was a disturbing concept.

Likewise, the few groups who saw the Emmerdale clip were simply concerned with what they saw as the relatively poor production values of this drama and others in the genre. The ferocious fight did not stand scrutiny post transmission and made no impact on respondents.

Although unmoved by the clips, our respondents did discuss soap operas in some depth and EastEnders in particular. Their concerns were not about specific scenes of violence in the drama, but about more low-level, on-going aggressive behaviour and dialogue from characters – especially those characters that held particular appeal for younger teens and children. Parents were concerned that challenging behaviour on screen, particularly when enacted by younger characters, might have an undue influence on their own children.

Some respondents felt that the many of the themes of EastEnders were essentially adult and because of this they preferred to watch the show with their children in order to explain more fully the storylines, if they deemed it to be necessary. Violent scenes became a concern if parents felt unable to dismiss the action to their children as “soap silliness”. Sometimes they felt themselves obliged to delve more fully into the reasons behind a strong storyline or a violent scene and were not always willing to be placed in that position.

On the other hand, a few respondents were critical of the “morality” of these strong soap storylines, pointing out that real life did not always turn out so satisfactorily and it was misleading to let younger viewers think that “life was like that”. There was a double bind to a “realistic” soap like EastEnders; some respondents prized it for its essential morality which enabled younger viewers to see that decent behaviour inevitably triumphed, but others felt that youngsters should realise that real life was not so easily navigated.

Viewers do sometimes give a soap opera such as EastEnders a little license to push the boundaries but the programme-makers cannot take this for granted. For a storyline to be considered strong but acceptable, the theme has to be easily recognised as justified and worthy of exploration. The characters need to be

sufficiently well-established in their roles to reflect the moral consequences of violence.

A few groups saw another EastEnders clip of a fight in the Queen Vic. Although the respondents did not feel the violence was unacceptably strong, they did question the need for it. The episode was based around a relatively new character suffering revenge for his former life as a football hooligan. Respondents had not sufficiently accepted or “bought into” this character and his background; consequently, they felt the violent scene was gratuitous, although not too strong. Many respondents felt this was largely a case of violence descending “out of the blue” and they had less tolerance for this fight than they would grant to a punch-up between well-established foes such as Phil and Ian.

The clip from The Bill which showed the stabbing of a police officer was thought to be well done but most respondents felt it was too strong to be shown before the watershed:

“It would shock me to see that before the watershed. You don’t expect that. Most things before the watershed are soaps...it was the sound as he pulled out the knife.” (Family, Female, Manchester)

For a number of viewers this clip helped crystallise in their minds the gradual move towards stronger violence in television programmes which they had been vaguely aware of but which they had not fully appreciated.

“It’s not like The Bill I grew up watching. I haven’t seen it since I was a teenager and I think it’s a bit too much for 8 o’clock but it is really well done.” (Young Female, London)

Many respondents, especially those under 50 years old, felt this sort of violence was an important part of modern drama as it was realistic and showed the terrible consequences of knife crime. They felt that stronger pre-watershed dramas had an obligation to reflect the realities of life. However, it was clear that The Bill had more latitude as a “cop” show than domestic soap operas such as EastEnders or Emmerdale. Like medical dramas, viewers had different expectations of pre-watershed police shows and took it for granted that tough action was a pre-requisite when it came to storylines.

1.2.1 SOCIAL FACTORS

“If you’re trying to make a drama, you’re trying to make it real. You can’t take the ‘action’ out of an action movie...and you can take the reality out of the unreality.” (Male, 45-54yrs, Leicester)

The most frequent comment made by respondents to explain their tolerance of violence in drama was “life is like that.” This thinking rang true for all social groups throughout the research. Respondents in less affluent social classes, especially those in the inner-cities, felt that violence in drama was necessary as it reflected their own

experiences; it was important to them that violence was realistic, not unduly softened, misrepresented or ignored. Hence, the stabbing in *The Bill* was acknowledged to be strong but also necessary as respondents were keenly aware that such incidents happened in real life and viewers should see them.

Even those respondents whose own lives had not been directly touched by violence still felt that drama needs to show “what life is like.” Strong shows like BBC1’s *The Street* had license to push the boundaries somewhat in terms of violent content as respondents were aware of the realism of such material; they may not have encountered it in their own lives, but they were aware of it via the news, the press and the information they received via the internet.

CONCLUSIONS: SOAP OPERAS AND PRE-WATERSHED DRAMA

- Soap operas are family viewing; consequently content has to appeal to a very broad age range without falling into the traps of being either too bland or too extreme. Viewers switch on for strong characters and storylines; inevitably, those episodes that contain the most controversial scenes are also regarded by viewers as the most memorable.
- But as in all other dramas, strong content is only acceptable to viewers if they feel it is justified and an intrinsic development of the plot. Respondents did not like what they saw as casual, or “normalised” aggression, whether in dialogue, attitude or in brief scenes of violence. Low-level aggressive behaviour, shouting, slapping, shoving, threatening or similar behaviour was mentioned as more of a concern – largely through fears of imitation – than the occasional violent “set-piece”. This sort of behaviour was especially a cause for complaint when it was demonstrated by younger characters or those cast members with “teen appeal”.
- Some respondents mentioned enjoying the intrigue of storylines like the *EastEnders* “who shot Phil”, as the emphasis was on the whodunit rather than on the original scene of violence.
- *EastEnders* has a particularly difficult place in the soap universe. All respondents accepted it was markedly different in tone and themes from other soaps and chose whether or not to watch it with this knowledge. There is clearly a fine line between an acceptable adult storyline, which may be tough viewing on occasion but is ultimately understandable and helps parents tackle difficult issues, and a storyline which older family members struggle to justify or explain to their children.
- The most frequently referenced example of a strong but justified storyline was the domestic violence plot involving Trevor and Little Mo. Although the plot contained some episodes with violent scenes, which provoked strong responses at the time of broadcast, parents felt this was an important issue

that deserved exploration and had license from them to be shown realistically.

- It was very clear that soap operas exist very much “in the moment”. Those scenes from EastEnders and Emmerdale which had provoked very strong reactions when first broadcast fell flat or were considered amusing when played to respondents in focus groups. A number of respondents felt the production values of a soap could not compare with those of expensive, post-watershed dramas and to their mind this meant that any soap “violence” lacked genuine impact, whether on broadcast or when replayed.
- But many viewers, whether regular fans or occasional browsers, do get caught up in the moment when it comes to watching strong material in pre-watershed dramas. On reflection, they may find such scenes lacking in conviction, but programme-makers have to bear in mind the power which the immediate can wield. A violent scene has very real impact at the moment of broadcast and audiences wrapped up in the action and characters, especially those with younger teens and children watching with them, can feel that their tolerance has been pushed too far.
- Those respondents under the age of 35 years old did enjoy soap violence. To their minds it lacked any impact as real violence, certainly compared to their other content of choice. Instead, they watched soap operas for those characters which appealed to them and the domestic scenarios which often reflected their own lives, but the violence was variously described as “unconvincing”, “amateurish” and “too clumsy to be anything but funny” by respondents amongst this age group.
- Older viewers, especially the over-65 year olds, were very unlikely to enjoy violence in soap operas. For them, occasional violent scenes were unnecessary but, like those parents with young teens and children, the real concern was aggressive behaviour and attitudes in general.

2. VIOLENCE IN FACTUAL PROGRAMMES

Respondents across all of our research groups showed great tolerance for the use of violent scenes and strong images in factual content. When asked for examples of strong images or violent content that had affected recently affected them, many respondents cited examples from terrestrial documentaries.

A Channel Four documentary about a young woman scarred in an acid attack (Nicola, My Beautiful Face) and a BBC1 documentary about the injuries suffered in war (Wounded) were repeatedly mentioned as strong content which had made a profound and favourable impression on the respondents.

Well-established documentary strands such as Panorama were understood and trusted by respondents and given greater latitude than news to show extreme content; indeed, some respondents felt there should be no limits on the inclusion of strong content, provided it was justified by the subject matter.

But respondents were not as clear-cut in their assessment of other factual programming; in particular, the majority of factual entertainment programmes were viewed and judged by respondents as “reality television”, a genre which was afforded less respect and tolerance than documentary programmes.

2.1 DOCUMENTARIES

Respondents were shown a clip from a Panorama programme, Hate on the Doorstep (BBC1, 8.30pm), which featured two undercover Asian reporters and documented the unprovoked abuse they received, culminating in a physical attack. A number of respondents had seen the documentary on transmission and there was overwhelming approval of the programme. Respondents felt this was a classic documentary, the style and tone were appropriate to the subject and some respondents felt this film should be “required viewing” as too many people, they thought, believed that racism no longer existed and this showed the kind of abuse that they themselves had suffered or that had been visited upon friends or relatives.

“I made sure I watched that with my daughter. I knew it was coming on. It was very good. [...] It should show it's still like it these days.” (Older family, Female, Manchester)

A small number of respondents from an inner-city focus group criticised the reporters as potentially acting as “agent provocateurs”; however, this was very much a minority view.

This clip inspired a number of discussions about the importance of well-established documentary brands. The most referenced series was Panorama, although Channel Four was also mentioned as a reliable provider of hard-hitting and well produced documentaries. The well-established documentary strands inspired trust in respondents. They believed that subjects in well-known series had been chosen for a

genuine purpose, not as a cynical ploy to boost ratings for the broadcaster but because there was a story which had to be told. Respondents who had young teenage children felt confident in watching such shows as a family because they had confidence that strong subjects would be worthwhile and handled responsibly. Strong or violent material was not a concern for parents; they believed that the context and tone would ensure that even very strong images would be used properly and not as sensationalism.

A minority of respondents felt that “quality” documentaries should have license to include images of graphic violence if they were pertinent to the story.

Respondents felt that viewers had an engagement with documentaries that was markedly different from their approach to most other programme genres. The choice to view a documentary was seen as an active decision, respondents felt that as viewers, they made a deliberate choice to engage with a documentary and had reasonably clear expectations of such films.

The greater length of a documentary film also allowed violent images to be seen in context, and motivation was a key factor for ensuring the acceptability of graphic content. If respondents understood why a strong scene was thought necessary to be included in a documentary, they could accept it even if they personally found it upsetting or distasteful.

This latter thought was illustrated by a clip from a BBC2 documentary series *Horse People* (9pm). In this clip the series presenter, Alexandra Tolstoy, witnessed the sacrifice of a horse by a remote Siberian tribe. The killing is brutal and the film shows that Ms Tolstoy is visibly upset by the ancient custom.

Not surprisingly, many respondents were distressed by the death of an innocent animal. They found the brutality repulsive and a few respondents queried whether it had been necessary to include such distressing footage. But the majority view of the focus groups felt the motivation of the documentary – to show the workings of a very different culture - was clear and because of this, they felt it was acceptable to show such scenes although few of them would have chosen to watch the slaughter.

A lack of familiarity also played a part in respondents’ reactions to the clip. Few if any respondents had seen the documentary on transmission, none of them were aware of Alexandra Tolstoy as a presenter, thus their usual “clues” for establishing the credentials of a film and judging its content were not brought into play. A small number of respondents asked questions about the rest of the series and the purpose of it. Once it had been established that Ms Tolstoy was a “horse person” looking at the role and treatment of horses in other cultures, the motivation of the film became more understandable. Some of our groups felt it was only really possible to assess such content in the context of the documentary as a whole.

A number of respondents felt that violence against animals should not be shown; but most agreed that BBC2 was the obvious home for such material rather than BBC1.

A documentary clip shown to News focus groups provoked a similar response. In this case, groups who looked at a series of news and current affairs clips were shown a scene from a BBC2 documentary, *The Insurgency* (9pm). The footage shows the casual and cold-blooded execution of a number of Iraqi policemen by insurgents. Respondents found the footage horrific but the majority accepted that it had a place within a documentary film. They did not expect to see such graphic violence on the news but it was largely within their expectations of the documentary genre and they were confident that it would have served a real purpose within the film.

Respondents were also shown clips from factual programmes which were less easily classified as “traditional” documentaries. In the case of a clip from the BBC1 series, *Traffic Cops* (9pm), respondents understood the format and trusted the mixture of CCTV footage and interviews to tell the story of real life incidents. The clip showed dramatic CCTV footage of two young women risking their lives dodging traffic on a motorway. Respondents felt the clip and the series, which most of them were familiar with, was responsible and correctly handled. The footage was not staged for the cameras; respondents felt they were getting a clear account of a real event which had not been manipulated for effect. The commentary was explanatory and sober, largely restricted to facts about the incident and informing viewers of the aftermath.

As far as respondents were concerned, this was a documentary, but they stressed it was a different type of documentary than *Panorama* or Channel Four’s *Dispatches*. A number of respondents said that if one of the young women had been killed in the incident, the entire story would not have been shown; whereas a fatality would have been included if it had been part of a “real” documentary series. This was a clear and welcome distinction in the minds of respondents and they were quick to read the style and content of *Traffic Cops*, bringing to it different expectations and slightly less license than they would afford a more traditional documentary series. Likewise, the clip was seen as appropriate for inclusion in a longer film, rather than as part of a news bulletin.

2.2 OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARIES

Expectations were less clear when it came to observational or “fly on the wall” style factual programmes. A clip from a BBC2 post-watershed series, *Blame the Parents* (9pm) threw up many interesting observations about the different forms of factual and factual entertainment programmes.

Blame the Parents followed the progress of a group of families attending a parenting course. The aim of the series was to show the benefits that can result from parenting support and to see how family relationships were changed by the help and support they received. The clip in question showed a prolonged confrontation between a young teenage girl and her father. The language used by both of them was extremely strong and the row was markedly aggressive although no physical violence was used.

Some respondents found the scene upsetting, although others – particularly younger respondents – were provoked into laughter by the ferocity of the row and the strong language from the young teenager. Respondents were divided in their response largely because they were not clear about the intention of the programme. Once the motivation behind the series was explained, a number of respondents felt the content was more acceptable than they had first felt it to be. The purpose of helping “problem” families was laudable; even so, respondents still questioned whether it was necessary to show such a strong scene, especially as the language was so extreme.

Respondents were unsure how to classify this programme. For many in our focus groups, this clip was a form of “reality television”. There was some cynicism amongst respondents about television using members of the public in such a way, no matter how worthy the motive behind the programme.

A number of respondents felt this sort of show aimed to attract ratings by showing extreme behaviour and inviting viewers to be horrified or entertained by it. A number of younger respondents made it clear that they would occasionally watch factual programming with the expectation of entertainment as these shows would inevitably throw up examples of over the top behaviour and outrageous characters. Some younger respondents said they watched similar programmes more as freak shows than as genuine factual output and were their responses were coloured by experiences of reality shows as entertainment.

*“A lot of people just watch these shows to see people kicking off. It’s a bit like a more serious kind of Jerry Springer, ultimately it’s just funny.”
(Young Male, London)*

Some respondents also remarked on the title. Whilst Blame the Parents was acknowledged to be a catchy title and an accurate one, these respondents said the title went a great way towards determining their expectations of what they were about to watch. In this case, they felt the title undermined what was probably a serious, well researched show. To their minds, the rather flippant title indicated this series was not really to be taken seriously as a documentary and was obviously chasing ratings by using a provocative phrase.

This added to the suspicion which some felt on seeing the extreme behaviour of the two protagonists in the clip. Some respondents felt the subjects of the film – and similar shows - were being somewhat manipulated by the programme-makers to provide outrageous television moments which could be exploited and packaged in such a way by the broadcaster to achieve high ratings.

This growing mistrust of reality television was a significant feature of 2009’s Taste and Standards report. There too, respondents tended to describe a number of factual and factual entertainment shows as reality television, regardless of whether this was the intention of the programme makers. In terms of violent content, respondents were far less tolerant of graphic content in programmes they perceived to belong to the reality genre. To their minds, reality was primarily about

entertainment and was largely shaped and edited by the production team to provoke comment and outrage. Those shows that did not have a strong brand image were in danger of being seen as more cynical reality fodder, rather than as genuine factual programmes.

There was some discussion of “celebrity documentaries”, especially those with tackled serious matters. Sky’s award-winning documentaries authored by actor Ross Kemp were mentioned on a number of occasions, usually by young male respondents. Opinions were divided about the criteria applied to these films. Some respondents felt the presence of a “celebrity” like Kemp brought them to a subject they would not otherwise have bothered to look at. But there was scepticism over the format. One respondent talked about the lack of objectivity when he watched the celebrity reporter join in celebrations after the death of an enemy combatant; others felt this was acceptable as it showed the real reactions of the allied troops. But the respondents agreed that “real life” situations had to be treated with care; all but the most hard-hitting “celebrity” documentaries were seen largely as entertainment material.

CONCLUSIONS: VIOLENCE IN FACTUAL PROGRAMMES

- Respondents displayed great trust in established documentary series and in one-off documentaries which told compelling and worthwhile stories. This form of “classic” documentary-making had a great deal of license to use graphic images to illustrate their stories and investigations.
- Many respondents felt that strong material was acceptable to show to young teenagers and even to older children, as they felt it was often educational for them to see serious subjects presented in a responsible way.
- Brand familiarity was important to respondents when it came to their tolerance for unusually strong subject matters and material. One-off documentaries and short series were also granted the right to push the boundaries in terms of content as long as viewers could easily grasp the purpose of the subject and they felt it was presented in an appropriate, un-sensational manner.
- Another recognisable documentary form was represented by BBC1’s Traffic Cops. Respondents were very tolerant of strong material in this sort of series as they felt the narrative was straight-forward, which gave the sometimes sensational footage real credibility. The key to this and similar shows in the minds of respondents was the absence of any manipulation on the part of the programme-makers. Our respondents felt the CCTV footage and accompanying interviews gave an un-varnished view of events; moreover, it was real and had not been staged for the television cameras.
- Documentary-makers have to be mindful of audience sensitivities; strong images still have the potential to be genuinely distressing especially when the

subject matter shows the vulnerable and defenceless. Perceived cruel or mistreatment of animals always provokes a strong response from British audience, regardless of programme genre. In the clip shown to focus groups, it was difficult for some respondents to accept very strong scenes on the basis that they were being given an insight into a very different culture from our own. Although most respondents accepted that the BBC, in particular, had a remit to show this type of film, it was still too distressing for some of our groups.

- Respondents showed some suspicion of “real life” documentaries, regardless of the intention of the programme-makers. A weariness with reality formats led to some factual or factual entertainment programmes being assessed on much the same basis as out-and-out reality shows.
- Respondents felt more cynical about violent scenes in fly-on-the-wall shows and observational series. There was an underlying feeling that the ordinary people featured in such programming were vulnerable to manipulation by programme-makers who looked to creating moments of drama and conflict as means of attracting ratings. Titles, tone and filming techniques all gave respondents the belief that the material they were watching did not have the values of a more traditional documentary. The shows were often enjoyed, but largely as a form of “entertainment” and were considered less credible than more traditional documentaries.

3. (A) NEWS

3.1 VIOLENT CONTENT IN TELEVISED NEWS OUTPUT

There was a clear distinction in the minds of our respondents between real violence on television and fictional or entertainment violence. Incidents of real violence portrayed in the media were always spontaneously mentioned by respondents as those issues or images that had most upset, shocked or offended them. The most commonly-mentioned incidents were local stories of murder, violence, suicide or bullying which had been watched on the local news or read in local newspapers, for example, the newspaper publication of a photograph of a suicide in Northern Ireland was mentioned by a few respondents as an unacceptably violent image.

National and international stories were the next most frequently mentioned items that affected people. Powerful stories as well as shocking images stood out as memorable; some younger respondents mentioned Jan Moir's Daily Mail article on the death of Stephen Gately as something which had genuinely offended and upset them.

All of our focus groups saw a range of clips from televised news, three clips from the BBC and one from Al Jazeera. In addition, there were three labs dedicated to news content alone.

Respondents were quick to mention that any one news bulletin had to take into account different sensitivities within its audience. This was very marked in the item featuring the stabbing of Daniel Pollen. This clip showed the fatal stabbing of a young man, Daniel Pollen, which was caught on CCTV. The item, which also included interviews, was played on both BBC1 regional news at 6.30pm and on the 10pm news bulletin. Daniel Pollen's parents had approved the use of the clip as part of a campaign calling for improved CCTV technology.

To all our respondents, the legitimacy of the clip hung largely on whether Daniel's parents had consented to its use. Once it had been made clear that this was the case (it was also stated in the item itself) nearly all respondents felt it was appropriate to use in both bulletins. A few respondents queried whether the CCTV footage needed to be repeated within the item, as it was such a distressing image. However, most respondents felt it was difficult to work out exactly what they were watching and needed the explanation and the repetition of the footage. All our groups felt the warning which was made at the start of the item was essential; a few people said they would have preferred a stronger warning.

The Daniel Pollen clip was thought by many respondents to be typical of the violence they felt around them in real life, even if they did not actually experience it at first hand. It was even more upsetting as it was a random, completely unprovoked attack; those respondents with teenage children were particularly concerned that

their children needed to see this kind of item to warn them about the dangers of knives and the need to take care on the streets.

Sensitivity of a very different kind was brought to bear on a report about the charges facing alleged paedophile, Vanessa George. The clip, played on BBC1 News at 10pm, sought to explain the nature of the charges against the nursery worker, but the reporter clearly stated that he would not detail the majority of the charges as the content would be too distressing for audiences. The item also included sections of a taped police interview with George and a few non-explicit photos found on her camera. Respondents were asked whether the BBC had gone too far in its report or, conversely, had the report gone far enough? Did the broadcaster have a duty to report the charges which had been read out in open court and would be freely reported in the press and online?

Perhaps surprisingly, all our respondents felt the BBC had made a correct judgement in the compilation of the report. There was no appetite for more details, respondents felt the precise nature of the charges would be too disturbing for them to hear; many respondents felt they could guess or imagine what kind of abuse George had been accused of and they were pleased the BBC had not taken the story further.

Likewise, respondents felt it was important to hear the tape featuring Vanessa George; care had been taken to ensure no personal details of victims were included but respondents felt it gave them a view of her attitude which could not have been replicated by a third person report of the police interview.

3.2. TERRESTRIAL NEWS BULLETINS

The majority of respondents over the age of 30 still followed the linear schedule of terrestrial news bulletins and spoke about their different expectations, particularly when it came to the early evening and late evening broadcasts.

The 6pm-8pm bulletins were particularly useful for this age group; for many the early evening news bulletins signalled the change of the working day into their "own" time and provided a swift catch-up on the day's events.

Even at 10pm, the majority of our over 30s respondents preferred restraint when it came to graphic content. Focus groups viewed an item which showed mobile film footage of the death of Saddam Hussein (BBC News, 10pm). The report stopped short of showing the actual moment of death, concentrating instead on the abuse hurled at the former dictator by his guards and also on his audible response to them.

The majority of respondents thought it was right for the BBC to have stopped the footage before the moment of death. They felt it showed respect for human life and, as several respondents commented, the point of this item was not the death of Saddam, which had occurred a few days previous to this bulletin, but rather the abusive behaviour of the guards.

A fair number of respondents had watched the graphic images online. A few respondents mentioned that they or family members in different countries had watched explicit footage of Saddam's death with very young children without any qualms over the content. Many respondents felt that sensibilities in other countries were not the same as those of British audiences. However, even these respondents felt the BBC had positioned the item correctly, on the 10pm bulletin rather than earlier in the evening, and had met their expectations of the BBC News brand by showing restraint and also issuing a clear warning before the footage was shown.

"Having seen [the Saddam execution] on YouTube, the BBC actually put that (clip of television news bulletin) together really well, they didn't show too much, the explanation of what was going on was really good and I think they cut it off at the right point. [The whole execution clip] was horrific." (Online User, Female, London)

A very few respondents felt there was a danger of the BBC becoming too protective of its audiences and unduly censoring strong images for fear of offending or upsetting viewers.

3.2.1 NEWS BULLETINS AND THE TERRESTRIAL SCHEDULE

BBC1 news bulletins are regarded as an integral part of the channel's schedule, hence respondents, while expecting strong images in bulletins, still carried with them the expectations of a broad, family-based channel. Respondents were aware that news bulletins would inherit an audience from previous programmes and this would inevitably have some bearing on the mood of the viewer. This was speculative thinking, although some respondents felt a strong post-watershed show followed by the News might make them think life was "all doom and gloom". But no-one proposed that favourite shows such as popular crime dramas should be directly taken into account when making editorial decisions for news bulletins.

Alongside this was the understanding that audiences have a less robust approach to television bulletins compared with online news; the act of seeking out a news site made people feel more responsible for what they chose to consume.

3.2.2 ROLLING NEWS

Our focus groups were less commendatory of rolling news when compared with terrestrial news bulletins, although violent images were not seen as an issue on the 24 hour news channels. Many respondents complained that broadcasters were all too often forced to fill the non-stop schedule with content that fell short of genuine news standards. They felt that if broadcasters were to begin to use violent content in such a way i.e. to pad out content on a slow news day, this would be gratuitous and it would be an unwelcome development as far as audiences were concerned.

3.3 ACCEPTABILITY OF STRONG OR VIOLENT IMAGES

Respondents valued clear and factual news reporting delivered by journalists they recognised and trusted. All of our respondents appreciated that arresting, strong and sometimes violent images play a vital part in engaging viewers in a story. Our news labs, in particular, discussed the relevancy and acceptability of strong material as part of a news item on terrestrial bulletins.

The three news labs, as well as two early screening groups, were shown an item which had run on the BBC1 10pm News. The report from Jerusalem was an account of the dramatic shooting of a Palestinian man who had killed and wounded a number of people by driving a bulldozer at them. The item contained footage of the driver being shot dead by an Israeli off-duty policeman.

The footage was dramatic, made more so as the shooting took place just as a BBC reporter had been describing the initial deadly rampage of the bulldozer. The film of the shooting, slightly obscured by the cabin of the bulldozer, was included as part of the final package and had run – prefaced by a warning – in the main 10pm bulletin.

Respondents were shocked by the clip. They appreciated the remarkable drama of an event that had unfolded largely before the reporter's eyes, but many felt the BBC had gone too far in showing the shooting of the driver. Their judgement was that the moment of death was not necessary to the story; the footage could easily have been stopped just before the shots were fired without harming the impact of the story – it was incredible footage but the moment of death in visual terms was ultimately irrelevant to the story itself.

News labs also watched a report from Bosnia made by Kate Adie for the 9pm bulletin on BBC1 in 1993. Kate Adie showed the bloody evidence of an atrocity which had left a number of people dead. Her final piece to camera was delivered with the body of an elderly woman clearly in shot. Some younger respondents in particular felt the positioning of the reporter in front of the corpse was insensitive and overly graphic. However, many older respondents did not remark on the body as their attention was taken by the authoritative and measured delivery of the report.

A number of respondents made it clear that a “no nonsense” report delivered by a trusted journalist such as Kate Adie or John Simpson gave an item more licence to carry strong images. Others mentioned that as the report made clear that the atrocity was now being investigated as a war crime, and that too made the use of violent images more acceptable and relevant.

Some respondents noted that the BBC team had been the first team to find the scene of the killings and were therefore reporting on what they saw rather than deliberately seeking out strong images to illustrate a more general story.

Hardly any respondents felt this report was excessive in its use of graphic images. Most respondents went further and felt the BBC should be able to go beyond the

remit of its own guidelines on occasions, such as this, when a credible piece of journalism needed to be complemented with images of violence and death. To many, the report had to be backed up by the shots of violence if viewers were to really appreciate the enormity of the incident.

“I expect the BBC to have boundaries for what they can show, but when the news story demands it I think they should feel able to break their own boundaries.” (Female, News Lab, London)

3. 4 THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL STORIES

A number of the clips played to the three news labs, and a couple of the clips played in all the focus groups sought to explore the expectations of audiences when it came to violent images in international stories as opposed to those with strong domestic links.

This discussion was prompted rather than spontaneous; it was not a top-of-mind issue for our respondents. News groups viewed a BBC1 10pm news item featuring amateur footage of an Israeli wedding party. The footage showed the collapse of the dance floor, with many guests plunging to the ground, some of them to their deaths. The news story followed the rescue operation and revealed that the developers had been arrested and charged with faulty building work.

Respondents were fascinated by the footage which had captured the moment of tragedy; many wanted to see it replayed. A few respondents felt the journalistic story – the arrest of the developers – appeared to be almost an afterthought but nearly everyone felt that the story, coupled with the amazing footage, made this a legitimate story.

The broader debate around this clip was instigated by moderators. Respondents were asked whether they would have felt happy to watch the footage if the tragedy had taken place in a British city such as Glasgow or Birmingham; moderators pointed out that it would be unlikely for the BBC to have shown the same footage if the tragedy had taken place in the UK.

Most groups felt very uncomfortable with the notion that they had been content to watch, in fact, had been enthralled by footage showing a tragedy abroad but that a different editorial decision might be made in the event of a similar domestic tragedy. It was difficult for most respondents to put aside the compelling nature of the footage to think about the editorial principles of the decision-making process. A few respondents did admit there was an instinctive difference in audience responses to domestic tragedies, but the majority of respondents felt that editorial principles should not vary:

"I think we should know if it's reality and it's happening. The news teams have a duty to report such things, wherever they happen. You can't say it's ok to show it if it's in another country [and not in the UK]." (Post-retirement, Female, Aberdeen)

All our focus groups were shown a report on Israeli war crimes which had been broadcast by Al Jazeera. The footage contained some very strong images of the dead and the dying, including some footage of resuscitation being performed on an obviously dying man. The images within the clip were very unlikely to have been shown on the BBC, especially in a news bulletin.

Respondents were shocked by the images but most of them did not consider the report had gone too far. A number of respondents said the footage had shaken them, but that was not necessarily a bad thing. They felt it was essential that every so often they should be jolted out of their comfort zone and reminded of the real horrors of war. Quite a few respondents confessed to "compassion fatigue" especially when it came to the Arab-Israeli conflict or other long-running disputes. Hence a significant minority felt that news reports sometimes had a duty to push the boundaries a little to remind people of the impact of conflicts. As one respondent said about the Al Jazeera clip:

"It reminds of how terrible it is for those people. That's their life." (Family, Male, Manchester)

The Al Jazeera report contained a large number of strong images but our respondents were not unduly distressed by this nor did they think the images were unacceptably violent.

Overall, many respondents did not feel that the Al Jazeera clip was much stronger than footage they would expect to see on more mainstream news channels. There was not a sense amongst respondents that different news outlets broadcast widely different content, although respondents were aware of different news agendas, especially in those outlets serving minority audiences.

There was a sense from respondents of all age groups that strong news images were not out of the ordinary in their own personal experiences. Younger respondents had often sought out violent footage online whereas a number of older respondents reflected that they had seen shocking images from earlier conflicts, in particular, Vietnam, therefore they were accustomed to violent images in the news. The Al Jazeera clip, whilst strong, was seen as part of necessary war coverage heading.

Both this clip and the Kate Adie report from Bosnia had a real impact on the focus groups and made respondents reflect on how easy it was for war reporting to become commonplace and fail to engage the viewer. Whilst the BBC had to be sensitive to its audiences, respondents felt there was a need, on occasion, for boundaries to be pushed in terms of strong content. There was not a call for more violent content to be shown as a matter of course, but rather for exceptional decisions to be made if an individual story merited more robust images.

Respondents were divided in their views about current conflicts. A majority of respondents felt the BBC in particular should provide clear, un-biased reporting on events in Afghanistan or Iraq. But a minority of respondents thought that broadcasters had a duty to be supportive of British troops and reflect that in their reporting.

3.5 NATURAL DISASTERS

Our focus groups were not shown clips from any natural disasters such as the 2004 Tsunami or reports from famine-stricken countries. However, strong images from natural disasters were mentioned spontaneously by some members of our focus groups and the general opinion was that news reports had a greater licence to show distressing shots from these events.

Although some respondents said they were often upset by powerful images, there was a distinction between strong content from natural disasters and strong content from “man made” disasters such as war. Respondents cited a number of reasons for their tolerance of strong images from natural disasters:

- They felt there could be no element of bias or propaganda in the reporting of a natural disaster; it was straightforward news and there was no possibility of journalists “taking sides” which might occur in the reporting of a war atrocity.
- Respondents also viewed powerful reports from natural disasters as a call to action, where respondents could contribute to relief campaigns and also feel that something was being done to help victims.
- Finally, respondents described the freedom from what research company Blinc have dubbed “species shame” when watching reports of natural disasters, that is, human beings were not responsible for the catastrophe therefore respondents did not feel anger or distress about the behaviour of their fellow human beings.

3. (B) ONLINE NEWS AND THE BBC

The majority of our respondents felt that BBC News should have consistent editorial principles across its different platforms; terrestrial news, rolling news on a digital channel and online.

Online was expected to have the same standards as BBC television news, hence if a story based on a news bulletin was amplified online, the new content should conform to exactly the same editorial judgements that would have been pertinent to the television transmission.

Although respondents felt that the very act of choosing to access online content brought with it a more active, more engaged frame of mind than that of passively watching a terrestrial news bulletin, they still allowed very little extra leeway to BBC online content. Respondents over the age of 35, but also a surprising number of younger age groups, believed the BBC and BBC News in particular to have a clear set of editorial values which made the broadcaster a reliable and trusted outlet for news. The BBC is expected to be more active in applying these editorial brand values across all platforms, regardless of differing expectations of the viewer or user, and despite what other broadcasters or news providers chose to do with their content.

"If the BBC is like YouTube, then what's the point of the BBC...the BBC brand is 'we stop there'." (Male, Online Lab, London)

Only a very few respondents felt the BBC should exercise more caution online than on other platforms and a similarly small number felt the BBC website should be allowed to exercise less caution in showing graphic images of violence online. There was an understanding that stories could be treated in more depth online than in broadcast news bulletins but editorial decision making was expected to operate on the same principles as on other platforms.

Some of our respondents, especially young men, had accessed very strong and violent images online. Dedicated news followers also said they had often pursued stories via more obscure web sites and had been able to access extreme footage online – quite a number of respondents had seen the execution of Kenneth Bigley online, for example. But hardly any of these respondents thought the BBC should provide this sort of content. The majority of respondents thought the BBC had a duty to select stories according to importance rather than sensation and consider the most effective and straightforward way of relating the story.

However, a minority of respondents did not consider that the BBC should be different to other outlets, either broadcasters or content providers, in their provision of news and other content.

3.6 ONLINE CONTENT

Our respondents viewed an item which had featured on bbc.co.uk. The real life footage showed the miraculous escape of a man who appeared to have been mown down by a derailed train in Turkey. The footage was shown three times, from different angles, to show just how the man managed to cheat death.

Our respondents were enthralled by the remarkable footage and none of the groups questioned the validity of showing the item, even though it clearly did not carry significant news value. Respondents welcomed it as a 'good news' story and the impact of the footage was such that it was not perceived as a frivolous or pointless item. Whilst there was a cynicism about the obligatory "good news" item that is often placed at the end of terrestrial news bulletins, this story was felt to have earned its place online and was exactly the sort of item that lent itself to sharing or passing onto friends.

Respondents also viewed several items that featured online stills packages to ascertain what impact – and what expectations – online photographs provoked in online users.

One of the strongest packages was that of a gallery of dead dictators featured on bbc.co.uk, and described by one respondent as:

"Gruesome pictures of gruesome people coming to, for the most part, a gruesome end."

Respondents had to be informed of the context of this item before they were able to assess its purpose and make judgements about the acceptability of the strong images. Some respondents felt it had a genuine historical story to tell. Others felt it was almost a morality tale of bad guys getting their just deserts and quite amusing in a grotesque way. For a few group members the item lacked a clear editorial purpose or did not carry enough detail for them to be entirely convinced of the editorial merits of the story; they were not quite sure where or why it had earned a place on the BBC website. But they recognised that there was a section of online users who would appreciate this sort of content.

The overall reaction of respondents to this kind of news-related story was that it did have a place on the BBC's website as long as the content met the editorial standards applied to other news items and that care was taken to ensure users understood the context and provenance of such items.

3.7 USER GENERATED CONTENT AND THE NEWS

News platforms now have access to a range of user generated content (UGC); often this material affords access to events which could not be recorded by a traditional news crew. The very fact that such content is available can sometimes make it desirable as a news item, whether or not the value of the item fulfils traditional news criteria.

Our news labs were shown a clip that transmitted on BBC Wales Today, a prime time news bulletin. The clips showed footage shot on a mobile phone of a vicious and prolonged playground fight between two teenage female pupils. The news report referenced the web site on which the material had been originally posted.

The majority of our respondents dismissed this as essentially a trivial story which did not merit the treatment it received as a national story. A number of our lab members recalled playground fights from their own days at school; the difference nowadays was that invariably this sort of age-old confrontation was now filmed on any number of mobile phones and disseminated from person to person or posted online:

*“When I was a kid a fight at school would be one on one and if anyone else joined in, that was a no-no. Nowadays you can have eight on one, it’s going to be on somebody’s phone and that’s getting sent round everybody in school.”
(Black British, Male, Manchester)*

This report was generally felt to offer little other than notoriety for the participants. There was general agreement amongst respondents that unless the incident had some other, genuine news value, it should not have been broadcast. Respondents were aware that there were many websites where this kind of material could be posted but it did not have a place on any of the BBC’s news platforms.

CONCLUSIONS: NEWS CONTENT

- BBC News, on all its platforms, was highly rated and trusted by our respondents. The over 35 year olds, in particular, felt that the BBC had clear editorial principles which they expected to be applied to online content as well as to traditional news bulletins.
- Even those respondents (usually in the younger age groups) who did not articulate a clear sense of the BBC brand had an expectation that the BBC would make judicious editorial decisions and appreciated the restraint of story selection when compared with the vast array of strong and violent images available for use.
- There was evidence that respondents felt the BBC could occasionally push the tolerance of their viewers in terms of violent images, as long as the story deserved such treatment and the delivery was appropriate. The Al Jazeera clip was seen by many as very strong but a timely reminder of the realities of a long-running conflict; by contrast, most people felt the Jerusalem Bulldozer shooting went too far and the isolated incident didn’t merit the broadcast of the fatal shots, no matter how compelling the footage.
- A number of respondents had sought out stronger content online but there was not an appetite for the BBC to provide more violent images online than they would via their terrestrial and digital platforms. The BBC brand was

important, even to younger respondents, as a trusted and judicious provider of content in a world where the most extreme images were readily available. A number of respondents felt that online news stories could be more comprehensive than their linear counterparts but they still felt that BBC principles should apply to expanded content.

- Our respondents also felt there was a place for unusual and extraordinary content in news output, especially online. The miraculous escape of the man in the Turkish train crash was enjoyed by all respondents, primarily because it was a feel-good story which people would enjoy watching and sharing. A few younger respondents remarked that most shocking content online tended to be violent or unpleasant so strong content that ended happily was memorable and welcome.
- Respondents felt that rolling news was less rigorous in the choice and presentation of stories than terrestrial bulletins. Violent images were not felt to be a problem on rolling news, but respondents said that care had to be taken to ensure that violent images were not used to fill the schedule.

4. INTERNET, MOBILE AND CONSOLE GAMES

Our focus groups revealed how wide-spread the consumption of violent content has become on various platforms, namely the web, via mobile phones and through the enjoyment of violence-based console games.

Every group had at least one respondent who admitted accessing extremely violent footage on the internet; younger respondents shared a vocabulary of strong images, many had accessed the items via links sent by friends and had passed on the links to others. There was a recognition of “water cooler” moments around extreme footage and a sense of horrified enjoyment particularly amongst young male respondents.

Even some older respondents had seen content such as executions, although not as frequently as the younger generations. There was certainly a sense amongst the majority of respondents of this content being easily accessed and, although horrific, it had become an expected part of online material.

A number of younger respondents were uncertain whether some footage accessed by them was real or cleverly faked to shock and entertain.

Younger respondents talked about the violent images they had accessed as teenagers and those parent respondents appeared resigned to their older teenage children – 15 years and above - accessing this sort of content. Parents felt there was little practical they could do to prevent teenagers viewing violent images; instead they hoped that the messages they had given their children as part of general family life would enable youngsters to make sensible decisions about what they viewed and how they interpreted the content they accessed.

There was more concern on the part of parents about teenagers accessing hard core pornographic content than with the access of violent content.

Boys and young men were far more likely to access violent content than young women. Younger female respondents said they were most likely to view violent content on the mobiles of friends and boyfriends rather than seek it out themselves.

The young people we spoke to in an inner city Manchester group saw violent content as a fact of life. For these respondents, real life violence was often seen as “entertainment”. Teenagers, and older respondents, told us that no-one would call the police or try to intervene if they saw a fight on the street; instead, onlookers would film the incident on their mobile phones and send it to friends and family. Within hours, the footage would be viewed around the whole estate and it would become a talking point in the school playground the next day. The content was regarded as a combination of local news and real life entertainment.

As reflected in the Wales Today clip of schoolgirls fighting, mobile footage of playground fights or incidents of bullying is common currency; often being uploaded onto social networking sites to be accessed by an even wider audience. The commonplace nature of this kind of footage made it difficult for many respondents, especially younger respondents, to categorise any web footage as particularly violent – it was simply a fact of life and it was up to each individual to access this material or avoid it if they chose to do so.

Few respondents believed that television and online violence had a direct bearing on the behaviour of teenagers and children. There were more worries expressed about violent console games; parents were concerned about the possible effects of such games and were quick to refer to press stories about the detrimental effects of console games. Some game-players themselves expressed surprise over the levels of violence in games such as “Call of Duty” but the lack of a moral standpoint in the game was, to many respondents, the most disturbing factor in the game as the player became part of an amoral universe and to succeed they had to make decisions which went against their innate sense of right and wrong.

“I let them play (console games) because I trust them to deal with what they’re seeing. But there’s definitely been a desensitizing of the population, not just children, all of us.” (Female, 35-44yrs, Bristol)

A minority of respondents, largely teachers, youth workers and those with responsibility for or knowledge of disadvantaged youngsters, felt that the prevalence of violent footage on the web or via mobile phones and the un-supervised access to violent console games did have a detrimental effect on vulnerable youngsters, especially those lacking the security of a strong family background.

It was not possible for this research project to draw any conclusions about the potential harmful effects of strong content on the web and via mobile phones or contained in console games. Parents were left to trust the commonsense of older teenagers in dealing with this material but were concerned about possible detrimental effects on younger children who had limited life experiences to draw upon when viewing or playing with material that contained violent images.

For younger respondents in particular, regular access to such material did bring about a different hierarchy or set of value judgements when it came to the content available on more regulated platforms such as mainstream television or bbc.co.uk. There was little on these platforms to shock younger respondents and most of them had no desire for broadcasters, especially the BBC, to compete for their attention with violent and excessive content.

5. GENERATIONS AND LIFE STAGE

As with the Taste and Standards research, age and life stage played a significant part in how respondents viewed violent content across all media platforms.

5.1 PARENTS AND YOUNGER CHILDREN

The most acute concerns about violent content were heard from parents with children aged ten or eleven years old up to the age of fourteen. By the time children were fifteen or more, parents had largely given up attempts to regulate their children's consumption of television, internet, console games and mobile footage. Most parents felt by this age their offspring were sufficiently mature to deal with the more extreme content they might access.

The 10-14 year olds however, required much more careful supervision and parents found themselves in difficulty when trying to establish boundaries around strong content. Television was invariably the flashpoint for parental concerns; programmes were available to all and even if families were not watching together, it was easy for parents to quickly establish which programmes they felt were on the borderline of acceptability for children and younger teenagers. Console games and web content might be more extreme, but they were also more difficult for adults to police.

Pre-watershed drama was a concern; violent scenes were not an issue for parents but adult themes, especially sexual themes, and low-level aggression were the main concerns. Children aged 10-16 years old were particularly likely to watch EastEnders although parents felt this was the show most likely to need parental supervision and explanation for the younger teenagers and children.

Parents were aware of the watershed at 9pm but acknowledged that younger teenagers frequently watched post-watershed shows despite the fact that most of the material was aimed at an older adult audience. Again, the concerns lay largely with strong sexual content rather than with levels of violence: as one woman remarked after watching the Waking the Dead clip:

"If you're watching a drama with a 14 year old and a rape scene like that comes on (unexpectedly) then you've lost control in a way." (Female, 25-34yrs, Ipswich)

5.2 YOUNGER GROUPS

Use of different kinds of media had an impact on younger and middle-aged respondents. This age range (teenagers to 40 year olds) now use the internet as an entertainment medium as readily as they would view programmes on television. For many respondents in this age range, a typical evening's entertainment might consist of viewing numerous short clips of User Generated Content, alongside a time shifted

television programme, or part of it. The evening's entertainment might also include music videos and MSN or social networking sites; all the while the television might be on in the background and frequently became a source of online comment. This type of media consumer was almost un-shockable when it came to extreme content; the respondents who fell into this category were very media literate and had complete faith in their own abilities to select the content they wanted and avoid that which did not suit their particular tastes.

Consequently, television content was of little concern to these respondents; they felt in control of their viewing and online usage and violent images – both on television and online – had little if any impact on them.

5.3 THE OVER-60S

Age was often a factor but not always the determining factor when it came to the attitudes of respondents towards violent content in the media. Whilst the majority of the over-30 year olds felt there had been a gradual increase in violence on television over the years, it was only a genuine cause for concern for the parents with young teenage children and older viewers, especially the 65 year olds and older.

Older respondents were less likely to have encountered strong content on the internet and via mobile phones, although they were some exceptions to this and most of them were aware of the existence of such material or had stumbled across it:

“I watched one accidentally and what it was, was someone sent me an e-mail with a link, will you see this, and I clicked into it and it was a man driving a forklift and the big thing he had on the front of the forklift toppled over and flattened him. Why would you send me that, and why would I want to see that? That hasn't cheered up my day.” (Female, Older family, Belfast)

Footage that would have struck the younger generation as funny and the sort of material that could and should be shared with friends was incomprehensible to our older respondents.

The majority of over-60 year olds did not have the same cultural references as younger generations to help them classify violent content which they encountered on television and other media platforms. They were less likely to measure post-watershed dramas against the content of American imports or with the films readily available on the dedicated movie channels. They did not share the expectations of younger generations when it came to viewing stylised violence and were not aware that scenes could be viewed as merely “homages” to previous works.

However, the majority of older respondents were aware that the tastes of the younger generations were different to their own and, although they found some of the research clips to be unappealing, most of the older respondents felt the broadcast of such content was acceptable.

But a few older respondents complained that they were being pushed to the margins of the television schedules with little provision for them in everyday content. Older respondents were also far less likely to use any form of time-shifted viewing and relied heavily on the traditional television schedule to provide their content.

6. SCHEDULING AND CHANNELS

Nearly all respondents recognised and understood the place of the 9pm watershed in the television schedules. There was also an understanding amongst respondents that genuinely adult content was usually scheduled at 10pm, but there was no wish to see any change to the watershed as the point in the evening where tone and content makes a noticeable shift to the more adult.

Those respondents who were parents of older children and younger teenagers (10 or 11-14 year olds) were frequently uncertain about the suitability of post-watershed shows for their youngsters. An immediate concern expressed by these respondents centred on strong content at the top of shows, immediately after the watershed. Parents did not want to be “ambushed” by strong content before a storyline had been established; they wanted time for the programme to develop in order to decide on the suitability of the programme in question for their younger teenagers and older children.

In an echo of the 2009 Taste and Standards Report, it was clear from this research that patterns of family life were changing and many parents now allow 11-14 year olds to watch television beyond the watershed as a matter of course. For these families, clear programme information and warnings about strong content was especially important. Parents were unlikely to stop watching their favourite post-watershed shows but they did want to prevent younger teenagers and older children viewing content that was too graphic; the main concern lay with sexual scenes and storylines rather than violent content.

“You know when there’s a warning at the beginning, after the watershed. You know there’s going to be that sort of violent or sexual content, then there’s no misunderstanding, is there?” (Male, 45-54yrs, Leicester)

A small number of respondents, mainly older members of the Black British group, voiced their view that the Sunday evening schedule should be more gentle in tone and content than the rest of the week. These respondents had an expectation that Sunday night programmes should be appreciably less graphic in terms of strong language, sexual content and violence. For example, the scheduling of *Waking the Dead* on Sunday evenings was a significant factor in some respondents feeling the content was pushing the boundaries of acceptability; their expectations of the Sunday night schedule did not include a strong crime drama.

The majority of respondents expected a further shift towards strong content at 10pm, with many seeing this slot as the inevitable place for graphic US imports in particular. Many respondents said that *Dexter*, with its fairly extreme violence, would be acceptable at 10pm. Some respondents, especially those under the age of 40, felt *The Wire* should have been scheduled at 10pm on BBC2 and were critical of the decision to transmit it in the 11.15pm slot, although most respondents felt the allotted time was appropriate for the series.

Those respondents who regularly time-shifted content tended to follow traditional scheduling patterns. Hence, most respondents would opt to watch a time-shifted hour-long drama at 9pm if the dramas available in the linear schedule didn't appeal to them. Time-shifting makes respondents feel more responsible for what they decide to watch; consequently strong content is far less of an issue if they have elected to record and then view a show.

However, the majority of respondents under the age of 30 felt this showed the BBC would inevitably lack relevancy as a content provider. They placed less emphasis on the perceived sensibility of the content provider and more emphasis on the viewer's taste and access to content. Hence these respondents felt that if the BBC is to serve them properly it needs to see itself as part of a broadcast environment where the competition is not simply ITV1 but also Sky One, FX and any number of dedicated movie channels.

Those respondents in the oldest age groups felt the BBC, namely BBC1 and BBC2, should continue to be a reliable and familiar alternative to other broadcasters who they believe to be all competing for the youth market.

BBC CHANNELS

BBC One

There was a general feeling amongst respondents that terrestrial channels had a greater responsibility to schedule carefully and be more circumspect when it came to content, as they were readily accessible to all.

Within this expectation, BBC1 was given a fair degree of license by respondents to schedule programmes containing violent scenes immediately after the watershed. They felt that quality dramas such as *Waking the Dead*, *Ashes to Ashes* or *The Street* would inevitably contain some scenes of strong violence and this was acceptable; indeed, most respondents felt that even violence which was "a little more than necessary" added to the intensity of this kind of high value entertainment programme.

Respondents still expected a degree of care, especially in ensuring that the strongest content and scenes of sexual violence were not at the beginning of 9pm dramas and that comprehensive programme information allowed them to make informed viewing choices. A small number of respondents also felt that the Sunday evening schedule should be different in tone and content to the rest of the week.

BBC Two

Respondents saw BBC2 as slightly less mainstream than BBC1 and as the channel most likely to show hard-hitting and gritty programmes which might contain violent scenes. The right for the channel to transmit this kind of content was dependent on

high quality thresholds in terms of writing, performance and the integrity of story or subject matter.

Respondents felt that artistic or critical justification was the most important criteria for BBC2 especially when it came to pushing boundaries. Whilst BBC1 or ITV1 were more reliant on stars or household names to establish the acceptability of their dramas (such as Trevor Eve in *Waking the Dead* or Robson Green in *Wire in the Blood*), critical acclaim played a key role in establishing the credentials of a show. *The Wire* was a case in point; those respondents who knew the show and was aware of its award-winning credentials felt the series was suitable for BBC2.

Furthermore, a number of those respondents who had been shocked by the clip from *The Wire* were more convinced of its acceptability once they realised it was transmitted on BBC2 and in a late night slot.

BBC Three

Respondents viewed BBC3 as primarily a modern comedy channel and did not readily associate it with violent content. They felt that if the channel was to transmit violent content it would probably show stylised "cool" violence or cutting-edge animation which contained violence. The channel's target audience of 16-30 year olds are those viewers most likely to watch extreme violent content and our respondents in that age group indicated they would accept it as part of the channel's schedule.

BBC Four

Respondents did not have firmly-held views about the boundaries of content on BBC Four. As with BBC Two, respondents felt the integrity and quality of programmes was paramount and violent content could only be justified in the artistic merits of the show in question were very high.

7. APPENDIX

7.1 CLIPS USED IN BROAD GENRE WORKSHOPS

Drama			
Programme	Channel	TX	Content
The Bill	ITV1	8pm	Girl being punched and kicked to the ground, one police officer hit; another police officer stabbed in the arm, then the chest; the knife then pulled out of the wound by the attacker.
EastEnders	BBC One	8pm Good Friday	Scene of wife burying her husband alive at night in wood, intercut with couple going to identify the body of a dead child.
Dexter	ITV1	10.35pm	Dexter, an avenging serial killer, abducts and tortures a paedophile.
Waking the Dead	BBC One	9pm	Flashback to the gang rape of a young woman during the Second World War, while a bloodied vicar was forced to look on. Short scene of the young woman's body being carried by vicar, observed by her child, after she has hung herself.
Wire in the Blood [1]	ITV1	9pm	Main character (Robson Green) imagines how a victim has been killed, and we see two 'execution' type killings as if inside his mind; followed by 'real' execution in close-up.
Wire in Blood [2]	ITV1	9pm	Serial killer has a desperately frightened and bloodied young woman and young man captive and threatens to shoot them unless they perform coitus in front of him.
The Wire	BBC Two	11.15pm	The killing of a suspected paedophile in a back alley; we see victim's face being mashed up, in close up, with handle of gun.
Casualty	BBC One	8.20pm	Driver's view of girl being run over by ambulance.
Factual and Documentaries			
Programme	Channel	TX	Content
Blame the Parents	BBC Two	9pm	'Fly on the wall' observation of family, where a 14 year old daughter and father behave aggressively to one another, and very strong language is used.
Horse People	BBC Two	9pm	Siberian people slaughter a horse by strangling it, hitting it on the head with the back of an axe, and then plunging knife into its heart; we see two axe blows.
Traffic Cops	BBC One	9pm	Footage of major incident on a motorway: two women break free from police and run into road: both are knocked down.
News			

Programme	Channel	TX	Content
London Regional News	BBC One	6.30pm	CCTV footage of the assault and fatal stabbing of Daniel Pollen in Romford; interviews with CCTV operators and senior policemen; the footage of the attack is shown twice, once at the beginning and then at the end.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One	10pm	Footage filmed on a mobile phone of Saddam Hussein being taunted immediately prior to his hanging, not showing the actual hanging. A warning was given at the start of the piece.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One	10pm	Report on Vanessa George's trial in Plymouth for paedophilia. The exact nature of the charges was omitted because deemed too extreme and disturbing for broadcast.
Al Jazeera news report	Online and broadcast	-	Images of death and destruction in the Occupied Territories as UN report is released. We see attempted resuscitation, blood, body parts, dead adults, and a child.

7.2 CLIPS USED IN NEWS SPECIFIC WORKSHOPS

TV News			
Programme	Channel	TX	Content
London Regional News	BBC One	6.30pm	CCTV footage of the assault and fatal stabbing of Daniel Pollen in Romford; interviews with CCTV operators and senior policemen; the footage of the attack is shown twice, once at the beginning and then at the end.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One	10pm	Footage filmed on a mobile phone of Saddam Hussein being taunted immediately prior to his hanging, not showing the actual hanging. A warning was given at the start of the piece.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One	10pm	Report on Vanessa George's trial in Plymouth for paedophilia. The exact nature of the charges was omitted because deemed too extreme and disturbing for broadcast.
Al Jazeera news report	Online and broadcast	-	Images of death and destruction in the Occupied Territories as UN report is released. We see attempted resuscitation, blood, body parts, dead adults, and a child.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One	10pm	Report on an incident in Jerusalem where the driver of a bulldozer was fatally shot.
BBC Wales Today	BBC One	N/A	Mobile phone footage of two girls fighting shown as part of a television news report on 'Bitch slapping'.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One	10pm	Report on the protests in Iran when Neda Agha-Soltan was killed and interview with the doctor who tried to save her.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC One & bbc.co.uk	10pm -	Footage taken during a wedding party in Israel. The party is underway when suddenly the floor collapses.
BBC Nine O'Clock News	BBC One	9pm 1990s	A report from Kate Adie in Bosnia on civilian deaths. The report showed a number of recently dead villagers.
BBC Ten O'Clock News	BBC	10pm	Report from Iraq on local reaction to news of the death of Saddam Hussein's sons. The report featured still photographs of the dead men.
TV Documentary			
Programme	Channel	TX	Content
Panorama: Hate on the Doorstep	BBC One	8.30pm	Undercover reporters experience racism in their neighbourhood.
The Insurgency	BBC Two	9pm	Execution of policemen by insurgents in Iraq.

Online News		
Site	TX	Content
bbc.co.uk	-	Web stills of an attack on a parade of the Dutch Royal family.
Evening Standard website	-	Web stills of an attack on a parade of the Dutch Royal family.
bbc.co.uk	-	Footage of Turkish train collision where a man narrowly escaped death.
bbc.co.uk	-	Web stills gallery of dead dictators.
Associated Press website	-	A report by a news photographer voiced over stills showing the death of a US Marine.