

Television Commercial Violence During Nonviolent Programming: The 1998 Major League Baseball Playoffs

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ABSTRACT. *Objectives.* To identify the frequency of violent commercials during the major league baseball playoffs in 1998 and to compare it with the 1996 playoffs.

Design and Setting. All 4 World Series games televised on the Fox Television Network (Fox), all 6 National League Championship Series (NLCS) televised by Fox, and 5 of 6 American League Championship Series (ALCS) playoff games televised by the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) were videotaped in October 1998. The results were compared with a similar study that analyzed the 1996 playoffs.

Results. Forty-four commercials (11.0 per game) that included violent interactions were noted during the World Series, 53 violent commercials (8.8 per game) during the NLCS, and 40 (8.0 per game) during the ALCS for a total of 137. Of these 137 violent commercials, 78 contained at least 1 violent act, 126 contained at least 1 violent threat, and 12 contained evidence of at least 1 violent consequence. One hundred five of the 137 violent commercials (76.6%) were television promotions and 23 (16.8%) were for big-screen movie promotions. Twenty-three of 35 big-screen movie promotions (65.7%) were violent. Ten of the 137 violent commercials (7.3%) contained obvious blood, of which 9 were televised by NBC. There were, however, an additional 20 commercials televised by Fox that contained visible blood if the videotape was slowed or paused. Sixty-three of the 137 violent commercials (46.0%) used fire and explosions, of which 53 were televised by Fox and 10 by NBC. Guns were involved in 86 of 137 violent commercials (62.8%), with Fox accounting for 64 (6.4 per game) and NBC accounting for 22 (4.4 per game). Knives were used in 1 violent commercial on both Fox and NBC. Comparisons that can be made to 1996 include the following: 1) violent commercials during the World Series (both televised by Fox) increased from 10.1 to 11.0 per game; and 2) violent commercials during the ALCS (both televised by NBC) increased from 6.0 to 8.0 per game.

Conclusion. Commercials during the 1998 major league playoffs were similar in violent content, compared with 1996. The violent commercials continue to consist primarily of promotions for television programs and big-screen movies. It continues to be counterintuitive to find such commercials in family-oriented programming and makes it difficult for parents to avoid exposing their children to this form of violence. *Pediatrics* 2000;106(4). URL: <http://www.pediatrics.org/>

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ABBREVIATIONS. NTVS, National Television Violence Study; NLCS, National League Championship Series; Fox, Fox Television Network; ALCS, American League Championship Series; NBC, National Broadcasting Company.

Violence in television has been declared a national public health threat by the US Public Health Service and other medical and professional associations.¹⁻⁴ In its executive summary, the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) states that television clearly has "awesome power to alter perception, influence opinion, and affect behavior."¹ The NTVS reviewed existing scientific knowledge regarding impact of television violence, and it concluded that there were 3 primary types of harmful effects: 1) learning aggressive attitudes and behaviors; 2) becoming desensitized to real-world violence; and 3) developing fear of being victimized.^{1,2}

Concerns regarding commercial content were noted in my study of the 1996 major league baseball playoffs.⁵ This follow-up study was performed to assess any impact that may have occurred from that study and other sources of concern regarding television violence.

METHODS

The author videotaped all 6 National League Championship Series (NLCS) games televised by the Fox Television Network (Fox) from October 7 to October 14, 1998; 5 of 6 American League Championship Series (ALCS) games televised by National Broadcasting Company (NBC) from October 6 to October 13, 1998; and then all 4 World Series games televised by Fox from October 17 to October 21, 1998. This was done from Bloomington, Minnesota, through the local Cable Company. Game 2 of the ALCS was not reviewed secondary to a videotaping error.

The definition of violence used for this study is the same as that used for the 1996 study. It is from the definition used by the National Television Violence Study¹ and is defined as any overt depiction of the use of physical force or the credible threat of such force intended to physically harm a being or group of beings. Violence also includes depictions of physically harmful consequences that occur as a result of unseen violent means, such as finding a murder victim lying in a pool of blood.

Because of the concern of bias when evaluating the videotapes, the author attempted to include only overt violent depictions. Examples of commercial content not counted as violent included normal sporting activity, the carrying of weapons without an overt violent act or threat, humorous wrestling, and simple arguments. The author reviewed the videotapes starting from the set of commercials just before the first pitch through to the last pitch of the game. Commercials included brief promotions of a few seconds duration to standard length commercials.

The commercials were evaluated for violent acts, violent

threats, or violent consequences, and, if any of these 3 were present, the commercial was counted as a violent commercial. The commercials were also evaluated for use of guns or knives in the violent interaction and whether they contained blood or other graphic content (severe images such as people running while on fire that were seen in some commercials reviewed for the 1996 study). It was noted early in the reviewing process that fire and explosions were frequent, and their use was then added to the variables being evaluated.

RESULTS

In the 15 games reviewed, there were 1550 commercials with 137 containing violent interactions (8.8%; Table 1). Forty-four violent commercials were noted during the World Series during its 4 games, which was 10.7% of commercials (44 of 413) aired or an average of 11.0 per game televised by Fox. This compares with 53 violent commercials of the 632 (8.4%) shown on Fox during the NLCS, for an average of 8.8 per game. The 5 of 6 games televised by NBC in the ALCS had 40 violent commercials of 505 (7.9%) for an average of 8.0 per game. Of the 137 violent commercials, 78 (56.9%) contained at least 1 violent act, 126 (92.0%) contained at least 1 violent threat, and 12 (8.8%) contained evidence of at least 1 violent consequence. The actual number of acts, threats, or consequences was higher because several could have occurred per commercial, but this was not quantified.

Of the 137 violent commercials, 86 (62.8%) involved the use of a gun, with 31 occurring during the World Series on Fox (7.75 per game), 33 during the NLCS on Fox (5.5 per game), and 22 during the 5 ALCS games on NBC (4.4 per game). Ten of the 137 violent commercials (7.3%) clearly contained blood, of which 9 were televised by NBC. There were, however, an additional 20 commercials televised by Fox that contained visible blood if the videotape was slowed or paused that would increase the percentage to 21.9. Sixty-three of the 137 violent commercials (46.0%) used fire and explosions, 53 of which were televised by Fox and 10 by NBC. Knives were used in 1 violent commercial on both Fox and NBC.

One hundred five of the 137 violent commercials (76.6%) were television promotions and 23 (16.8%) were for big-screen movie promotions. The other 9 (6.6%) included 3 for the "X-Files" movie video, 1 for a local news station promotion, and 5 for a truck commercial that eventually showed the violent acts to be a stunt and not real. On Fox, 73 of the 97 violent commercials (75.3%) were for television programming, with 54 of them being for only 2 series, "Brimstone" and "X-Files." On NBC, 32 of 40 violent commercials (80.0%) were for television show advertisements, with "Profiler," "The Pretender," and "Crime and Punishment" accounting for 25 of them. Big-screen movie promotions accounted for 18 violent commercials on Fox for an average of 1.8 per game, and 5 on NBC for an average of 1.0 per game. Overall, there were 35 commercials for big-screen movies, with 23 of the 35 (65.7%) having violent content.

Comparisons that can be made to 1996 include the

following: 1) Violent commercials during the World Series (both televised by Fox) increased from 10.1 to 11.0 per game; 2) Violent commercials during the ALCS (both televised by NBC) increased from 6.0 to 8.0 per game; 3) Gun use in violent commercials increased on Fox from 3.33 per game in the 1996 World Series to 6.4 per game in 1998 for the combined World Series and NLCS presentations. On NBC, gun use slightly decreased from 5.0 per game in the 1996 ALCS to 4.4 per game in 1998; and 4) Knife use was down from use in 24 violent commercials in 1996 to 2 in 1998.

Some other depictions of violence are harder to compare. Blood and other graphic content occurred in 21.2% of the violent commercials in 1996, but in 1998 depending on subjective criteria could be anywhere from 7.3% to 21.9%. The use of blood did seem to be less in terms of duration and amount. There were no burning bodies or similar graphic material depicted in 1998, but the use of fire in general and of explosions, in particular, seemed to be much increased, although no specific numbers were kept in 1996.

DISCUSSION

Many concerns unique to commercial violence were discussed in the study of the 1996 baseball playoffs.⁵ These commercials are likely to have negative consequences on society, and if they occur during family-oriented programming, children will be exposed to this violence even if parents would like to avoid it. This study is limited by a 1-reviewer process and by the inherent subjectivity of defining violence. Future studies should include multiple reviewers and assess interrater reliability. However, the commercials deemed violent in this study (and the study of 1996) were not subtle. Guns being held to victims' heads, shootings, punching, corpses, exploding buses and buildings with people inside, and people being chased in a threatening manner are easily described as violent and inappropriate for younger children. The intensity in many of the violent commercials is difficult to quantify, but it is very real. Violent dialogue, as well as visual violence, continues to be alarming. Examples of this include, "A man beaten and dragged to death . . .," "Little boy stolen from his hospital bed . . .," "Defenseless women . . .," and "Kids forced to work undercover . . . and they're turning up dead." Additionally, several commercials discussed serial killers.

There are large amounts of literature that warn of the negative effects of television on society. The statement of the National Association of Broadcasters⁶ on programming principles, although voluntary, states that violence "should only be portrayed in a responsible manner and should not be used exploitatively." According to a newspaper article, an NBC director of sports information stated that "standards people" review commercial content and determine whether it is suitable for a particular time period and show.⁷ So, have they determined that violence during family-oriented viewing time is appropriate? In one evening alone while watching the World Series in 1996, a

TABLE 1. Summary of Violent Television Commercials During 1998 Baseball Playoffs

Network	Game	Start (CST)	Number of Total Commercials	Number of Movie Commercials	Number of TV* Promotions	Number of Commercials Using			Number of Commercials Using any Violent Interaction	RE: Violent Commercials . . . Number for:		
						Violent Acts	Violent Threats	Violent Consequences		Network TV Programs	Big-Screen Movies	Other Ads
Fox (World Series)	1	7:00	102	3	24 (2)	7	10	0	10	8	2	0
Fox (World Series)	2	6:55	98	1	25 (3)	6	8	0	9	7	0	2
Fox (World Series)	3	7:20	107	2	22 (3)	6	12	0	12	10	2	0
Fox (World Series)	4	7:20	106	5	24 (3)	10	13	0	13	9	3	1
Subtotal			413	11	95	29	43	0	44	34	7	3
Fox (NLCS)	1	7:15	118	5	25 (3)	7	9	0	10	6	3	1
Fox (NLCS)	2	7:15	96	3	17 (2)	4	7	0	7	5	2	0
Fox (NLCS)	3	3:15	100	1	17 (2)	1	3	0	3	3	0	0
Fox (NLCS)	4	6:45	105	4	19 (2)	7	10	0	10	6	3	1
Fox (NLCS)	5	7:10	108	2	20 (2)	2	7	0	7	6	1	0
Fox (NLCS)	6	3:20	105	3	26 (2)	10	13	0	16	13	2	1
Subtotal			632	18	124	31	49	0	53	39	11	3
NBC (ALCS)	1	7:07	103	1	22 (4)	2	9	2	9	8	1	0
NBC (ALCS)	3	7:07	92	1	19 (5)	4	7	2	8	6	1	1
NBC (ALCS)	4	6:07	98	0	20 (6)	4	6	2	8	6	0	2
NBC (ALCS)	5	3:07	113	0	28 (5)	4	6	5	9	9	0	0
NBC (ALCS)	6	7:07	99	4	20 (4)	4	6	1	6	3	3	0
Subtotal			505	6	109	18	34	12	40	32	5	3
Grand totals			1550	35	328	78	126	12	137	105	23	9

* Parentheses indicate number of obvious local promos.

child could have seen 14 overtly violent commercials. These commercials contained at least 8 violent acts, 8 violent threats, and 5 violent consequences. A gun or a knife being used as a weapon would have been seen 10 times. In 1998 in 1 afternoon of the NLCS, a child could have seen 16 overtly violent commercials. These commercials contained at least 10 violent acts and 13 violent threats. A gun would have been seen used as a weapon 11 times. These numbers do not include the pregame and postgame shows. These and other facts from this study verify that commercial content continues to be a significant source of television violence.

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