

# An Alternative to the Impasse: The Grassroots Approach to Coping with Media Violence

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**ABSTRACT.** The volume of violence portrayed in American mass media has caused concern for decades, but media self-interests, weak governmental policies, and the First Amendment protection for freedom of expression have stymied efforts to improve media content. Grassroots endeavors to alert parents to possible negative effects may be a more effective approach. "Pulling the Plug on Media Violence," a campaign aimed at escalating consumer awareness, has been implemented by a volunteer group in North Carolina. This study, using the results of a statewide poll, evaluates the campaign's effectiveness and provides useful findings for future efforts devoted to similar issues. The survey shows that although awareness of the campaign was high, the level of concern about media effects was not influenced directly. Religiosity, gender and parenthood were found to be the most important factors linked to higher levels of concern about media violence. Future efforts to mobilize an anti-violence effort may want to target messages to parents (especially mothers) and work with churches in order to increase active involvement. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com>*

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## INTRODUCTION

There has long been concern that violence portrayed in media can have adverse effects on viewers, particularly children (i.e., Comstock and Strasburger, 1993; Peterson and Thurstone, 1933). Although television has been regulated by federal laws since its inception, these statutes do little to address content. Most content regulation attempts have been met with stiff Constitutional resistance. "Issues related to First Amendment rights, concerns about censorship and the need to establish the 'clear and present danger' as required by the FCC have prevented the enactment of strong regulatory controls" (Hughes and Hasbrouck, 1996, p. 137).

Still, citizen's concerns from time to time have prompted the government to investigate. The U.S. Surgeon General issued a report in 1972 concluding that TV violence may have adverse effects on children; however, no strong action followed as the report languished in a bureaucratic gristmill (Cater and Strickland, 1977). Ten years later, the National Institutes of Mental Health issued a report drawing similar but even stronger conclusions that TV violence does affect aggressive behavior among children. Other reports provided additional evidence—the Centers for Disease Control in 1991, the National Academy of Science and the American Psychological Association, both in 1993 (Wilson et al., 1997). Nevertheless, regulatory action remained elusive.

Individuals and groups, both on local and national levels, periodically have organized grassroots campaigns targeting either those who create the programming or those who view it. Once a core component of political activity that was overtaken by modern media marketing techniques, the grassroots approach recently appears to be experiencing a resurgence. For the purpose of this paper, the term "grassroots" efforts will refer to community, volunteer endeavors that address a problem on the local or regional level.

Little evaluation has been done of grassroots campaigns of social issues, however. Several researchers (Alcalay and Taplin, 1989; Hughes and Hasbrouck, 1996; Swinehart, 1997) have pointed to the lack of theoretical and empirical assessment of this resurgent route to promoting social change. This

paper provides a case study evaluation of a grassroots campaign that was conducted on a statewide level by the *North Carolina Coalition for Pulling the Plug on Media Violence*, an advocacy group comprised of health care and education professionals and parents organizations concerned about the effects of media violence. Annual awareness campaigns were used to educate parents about media violence and to encourage families to organize alternative activities to watching TV.

The *North Carolina Coalition for Pulling the Plug on Media Violence*<sup>1</sup> was formed in 1995 by a licensed pediatrician to address a growing concern that increased violence across the state might be linked to violence in the media. The primary activity of the coalition has been an annual “Pull the Plug” campaign, held each October for three consecutive years beginning in 1995. Objectives of the campaign include both attitude and behavioral change goals—increasing awareness of the impact of violence and “offer[ing] suggestions to families and child-care givers on what they can do about it” (Coalition’s History and Mission, 1996, p. 1).

During the first year, materials were provided through public schools with messages targeting kindergarten children and their parents. A parent flyer, given to each kindergartner to take home, included brief statistical and educational information as well as recommendations for reviewing family use of TV and video games. The materials reinforced Strasburger’s (1997) point that children may not be able to distinguish between the TV world and reality. A key element of the campaign has been to suggest alternatives to parents: set limits for children’s TV viewing; help children choose programs; and, talk as a family about how violence makes people feel. The flyer included a simple family viewing diary to permit families to briefly document the amount of time spent on media.

In the second year, the coalition stepped up its efforts to reach a larger audience statewide. The parent flyer and bookmark reinforcing the “pull the plug” message were distributed to 800,000 children in kindergarten through fifth grade throughout North Carolina’s 100 counties. A kick-off press conference led by the Governor lent “official” credibility to the program and helped generate media coverage. The coalition also placed billboards and radio public service announcements for broader reach, and distributed 10,000 posters to libraries, parks, and daycare centers that included tips for parents. A toll-free phone line was established for families seeking additional information. In 1997, however, the coalition’s efforts were abated slightly. The campaign focused primarily on the public schools, with messages targeting children through fifth grade and their families. The informational flyer and bookmarks were circulated and mass media coverage was sought during the one-week awareness campaign.

After three years of media violence awareness campaigns the coalition evaluated the efforts to determine effectiveness and to explore new ways to enhance efficiency. The volunteer organization tackled the controversial issue of media violence and had some success reaching its targeted audience. However, it is believed that a thorough look of these efforts may contribute to the resurgence of grassroots campaigns and to confirm a new, effective pathway to coping with media violence in our society.

### **RELEVANT LITERATURE**

Violence continues to be a major public health crisis in the United States, and some researchers assert that a portion of what occurs on the streets is spawned at least in part by what is viewed on the TV screen. Since TV's infancy, literally thousands of studies (see, for example, Comstock and Strasburger, 1993; Hughes and Hasbrouck, 1996; Wilson et al., 1997, 1998) have evaluated its impacts. Researchers generally conclude that violent content may be a "significant factor," contributing to aggressive behaviors and serving as a desensitizer to future violence (Comstock and Strasburger, 1993, p. 495). Strasburger (1995, 1997) claims that media influences between 15% and 20% of societal violence.

As a result, efforts have been made through the years to mitigate TV's potential negative effects. Two primary pathways have been taken—government regulation of the industry and grassroots efforts to educate the public and pressure primarily local media to behave more responsibly. The TV industry has faced some type of regulation almost since its inception, beginning with the Communications Act of 1934. However, many regulations had few teeth. Legislation has supervised what is broadcast to ensure public interest is served but has banned censoring media content (Hughes and Hasbrouck, 1996), a precedent that essentially has lasted throughout the 20th century.

Creating regulations and effectively controlling content can be time-consuming and only moderately successful. As a result, advocates have sought the grassroots route to reduce the potentially negative effects of violent content, believing that changes in media use patterns may have a more lasting effect on media content. If the audience for violent programs shrinks, producers will have a more difficult time attracting advertisers and may have to produce content that again appeals to the larger audience.

Grassroots efforts used to be at the core of American politics, but waned through the years, replaced by wholesale, centralized political mechanisms. Recently, however, there has been a resurgence in the use of grassroots approaches. The greatest value of the grassroots approach lies in its emphasis on

motivation and empowerment on the local level to overcome a pattern of apathy (Young, Swirsky and Myerson, 1995).

Grassroots approaches also have been used to address the media violence issue. Action for Children's Television (ACT), for example, was formed in 1968 as a grassroots organization, advocating regulatory changes as well as parent and child media education (Charren, Gelber and Arnold, 1994).

Many grassroots organizations adopt various ideas derived from the literature of communication campaigns and social marketing that aim to alter, reinforce, or promote certain beneficial attitudes, constructive concepts, and behaviors. Kotler (1975) defined social marketing as "the design, implementation, and control of programs seeking to increase the acceptability of a social idea or practice in target group(s)" (p. 283). Campaign developers, like marketing practitioners, are expected to have a keen understanding of whom their potential audiences are and how to reach and persuade them most effectively. Characteristics of the audiences that may help tailor the suitable message and select the right channel can include such variables as age, education, intelligence, gender, ethnicity, personality and lifestyle (Atkin and Freimuth, 1989; Eagle, 1981; McGuire, 1985; Swinehart, 1997; Wells, 1975). Because people tend to respond to messages that are relevant to their situations and adequately reflect their concept of reality (Dervin, 1989), successful campaigners must allocate their limited resources to generate the highest possible effect (Andreasen, 1995).

A number of demographic attributes may lead to varied levels of awareness and concern about media violence, and of likeliness of taking actions to pull the plug. Logical predictors such as parenthood, gender, religiosity, education, income, and age were identified. First of all, parenthood draws people to the issue—parents are more likely to pay attention to the subjects that might influence their children's welfare. Violence on media is certainly one of the common, primary concerns. Fully 64% of parents with children less than the age of 12 were also displeased with TV content (Krumplitsch and Brower, 1993). Many parents try to guard their children from TV's violent content. Parents also reported taking other actions including changing channel, turning off TV, restricting the amount and content viewed by children and monitoring child viewing (see, for example, Hamilton, 1998; Shelton, 1996; Wilson et al., 1998).

Gender is another potential factor that influences and distinguishes media violence concern level. It is beyond the scope of this study to trace the roots of the gender difference in forming attitude, belief, or cognition, yet scholars (e.g., Chodorow, 1974; Gilligan, 1982) found that females tend to emphasize the importance of harmonious relationship and care about others and, therefore, are likely to avoid or detest violence. Hamilton (1998) found that women

were more likely to be offended by TV violence than men and that violent programs received lower Nielsen ratings by women.

The religious community has long had a role in bringing about social change, from the civil rights movement to peace initiatives (Smith, 1996). Activity is not limited to a particular denomination, and both conservative and liberal religious groups have made their presence known among various causes (McRoberts, 1999; Shibley, 1998; Wilson and Janoski, 1995). However, findings are inconclusive regarding the role that religion and church attendance may play in the level of community or society action by parishioners (e.g., Arp and Boeckelman, 1997; Harris, 1994; Peterson, 1992; Smith, 1996). Although generally those who attend church tend to more actively participate in political activities or in volunteer services, it appears that other characteristics including race, income, and issue salience may play pivotal roles (Arp and Boeckelman, 1997; Peterson, 1992; Wilson and Janoski, 1995). For example, both Harris (1994) and Milbrath and Goel (1977) found that white churchgoers were more likely to take action based on personal motivations, whereas black parishioners were more often influenced by social circles. Many Christian groups, including the Christian Coalition, Moral Majority and the National Council of the Churches of Christ have voiced objection to the substantial influence of violent programming, particularly regarding the effects on children (Fore, 1990).

As to the influence of education, age and income on people's concern about media violence, there have been limited research and the findings inconsistent. A 1993 *MediaWeek* study found that less educated adults considered violent TV content to be offensive (Krumplitsch and Brower, 1993). Hamilton (1998) discovered that although more educated adults reported having greater concern about violent content, it was parents in lower education brackets who were more likely to change the TV channel to avoid violent programming. Further, the *MediaWeek* survey found that older adults were most concerned about TV violence; however, nearly one half of adults 18-34 also reported concerns about violent content. Limited information exists regarding the impact of socioeconomic status (SES). Hamilton (1998) reported that violent content programs received lower Nielsen ratings by high-income adults. Combinations of demographic factors seem to offer more insight. For example, parents with children under the age of 12—many of whom are younger adults—were displeased with violent content. Additionally, upper income women and parents were more likely to prevent a child from viewing violent content (Hamilton, 1998).

Milbrath (1965) synthesized various studies about the impact of education level, SES, and age on political participation. The studies found that those who have higher education and SES, and are older, are likely to pay attention to political affairs. Age per se, Milbrath argued, would not necessarily produce increased interest in public affairs. It appears that the duration of issue awareness

and family responsibility matter more. Therefore, in the case of media violence, it is rational to extrapolate that people with higher education, SES, and age are more likely to be concerned about media violence and participate in the campaigned activity.

Many social marketing and communications campaign experts (Andreasen, 1995; Atkin and Freimuth, 1989; McGuire, 1989; Rogers and Storey, 1987; Swinehart, 1997; Witte, 1997) stress the value of research and evaluation as keys to producing successful communication campaigns. Rice and Atkin (1989) explained that campaign research should incorporate "assessing needs, identifying relevant audiences, identifying program failures, and evaluating messages and effects continuously" (p. 8). While business marketers evaluate profitability and market share, social marketers evaluate the effectiveness of campaigns in changing attitudes and behaviors (DeJong and Winsten, 1998; Perloff, 1993).

However, many organizations—particularly grassroots groups—do not follow through with objective evaluations or self-appraisals of the project execution, despite the potential for discovering what is most effective. It is impossible to draw conclusions and make needed adjustments without formative assessments (Alcalay and Taplin, 1989; Swinehart, 1997). Perloff (1993) and Bloom and Novelli (1981) indicated that evaluations can be more difficult with social campaigns because of the focus on hard-to-measure intangibles such as emotions, attitudes, awareness and beliefs. This research paper begins the process of filling the evaluation void by assessing the "Pulling the Plug on Media Violence" campaign. The research aims to help establish a foundation for long-term evaluations that enable the project developer to track the progression of grassroots-initiated communication campaign over time. The study also is intended to gather useful, solid findings that could be of use to future campaigns of similar issues.

## ***METHOD***

In order to assess the effectiveness of the grassroots, statewide campaign questions assessing awareness about the campaign and attitude toward media violence were incorporated into a university-sponsored telephone survey in fall 1997.<sup>2</sup> Undergraduate and graduate students at the university receive two hours of preliminary training in telephone survey techniques prior to working as interviewers. The Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) technique was used to record responses within a database for analysis. The interview sample was drawn from across the state of North Carolina with a random digit dialing technique. A total of 1,374 residences were reached and 771 residential respon-

dents from across the state completed the survey, for a completion rate of 54%. The sampling error rate was calculated at 3.5%, at a 95% confidence level.

In the following analyses, we utilized the results generated from the survey to examine what demographic factors might lead to awareness of the campaign and might influence the level of concern toward violence portrayed on TV. Independent variables that were found significantly related to dependent variables, based on the correlation matrix, were selected for the next statistical testing, multiple regression. Due to the exploratory nature of this testing, a “step-wise” method was used to sift through and sort out the predicting variables.

Based on the review of relevant literature, the following research questions were posed and hypotheses tested:

*Research question 1: What demographics groups are more concerned about media violence? We set out to examine the influence of six demographic attributes on the concern level.*

*H1: Women, parents, older adults, frequent churchgoers and those in higher education and income brackets are more concerned about media violence.*

*Research question 2: What demographic groups will be more aware of the “Pull the Plug on Media Violence” campaign?*

*H2: The same demographic groups that are concerned about violence—women, parents, older adults, frequent churchgoers, and those in higher education and income brackets—will be more likely to be aware of the campaign.*

*Research question 3: Is there a relationship between concern about media violence and awareness of the campaign? This question is entirely exploratory because none of the grassroots campaign on media violence has been empirically examined.*

*H3: Respondents who are aware of the campaign will be more concerned about the media violence issue in our society.*

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the distribution of gender, race and age confirmed that the poll sample generally reflected the structure of the North Carolina population.



There were slightly more female subjects (57.5%) than males in the sample, and 19.3% of those surveyed were minorities. The largest age group represented was 25-44 year olds, constituting 41.1% of the sample, followed by 45-64 year old group, representing 31.4%. About half of the people interviewed had at least a high school diploma, and about 30% of the respondents had some college or graduate/professional education. Because the "Pull the Plug" flyers were distributed primarily to elementary school students, knowing which respondents had children attending elementary school was important information. About one-fifth (21.4%) had children in their households who were currently enrolled in elementary schools.

Nearly 30% of all respondents reported that they had heard of the "Pull the Plug" campaign. It seems that this grassroots endeavor may have achieved a certain level of success by effectively propagating the campaign's slogan. Education level, gender, and whether the respondent had children attending elementary school were crucial to awareness of the campaign (see Table 1).

Various literature (e.g., Gaziano, 1997) echoes our finding that an education enhances the processes of accessing, understanding and accumulating information. Females are found to be far more likely than males to learn about the campaign and obtain the message. McGuire (1985, 1989) cites gender as one audience characteristic that should be considered when designing communication campaigns. Perhaps mothers are still the primary childcare giver in the respondent families and more apt to be responsive to the campaign messages—reviewing or altering use of TV. There are two possible explanations to the fact that having children attending elementary school helps campaign awareness. First, the campaign may have successfully elevated the awareness of the campaign among parents. Dervin (1989), for example, notes the value going through the schools because children not only receive the message, but take the message home to their parents. On the other hand, people

TABLE 1. Prediction Model of Campaign Awareness

	<u>b</u>	<u>Beta</u>	<u>t</u>	<u>sig</u>
Education	0.022	0.145	4.086	<0.001
Gender	-0.114	-0.124	-3.477	0.001
Elementary Children	0.128	0.115	3.223	0.001
Constant	0.014			

df = 3      F = 13.021      p < 0.001  
R<sup>2</sup> = 0.049      Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.045

who have children in elementary school might be more likely to remember the campaign from other sources, such as outdoor billboards, publicized press conferences and public service announcements over the years. Therefore, the net contribution of the 1997 campaign efforts toward escalating parental awareness is not entirely clear; however, a cumulative effect could be possible. Swinehart (1997) also points out the value of campaigns that are repeated year to year—it reinforces the message.

Therefore, portions of Hypothesis 1 were supported for awareness of the “Pull the Plug” campaign—specifically, women, higher level of education and whether the respondent is a parent. Age and income variables, however, were not significant predictors of campaign awareness. The anticipated relationship between campaign awareness and concern toward media violence (Hypothesis 3) was not supported by this study. Respondents’ awareness of the campaign did not necessarily elevate their level of concern about TV violence, which indicates that the message perhaps is not persuasive enough to change people’s attitudes; on the other hand, literature shows that attitudinal disposition is harder to shift.

The next inquiry, then, was to identify what factors might influence people’s level of concern toward TV violence. According to the correlation matrix, five factors were found to correlate with concern about TV violence. First, older respondents were more concerned about violence on TV. Second, as found in examining campaign awareness, gender is a significant factor in concern about TV violence. Women were significantly more likely than men to be concerned about the issue. Third, it is not surprising to note that parenthood played a role in molding respondent opinions about TV violence. This may be explained because parents, concerned with their children’s welfare and psychological development, may pay attention to TV content that their children watch for hours each day.

The factor most related to TV violence concern, however, is the level of respondents’ religiosity. That is, the more regularly the respondent attended church, the more concerned he or she was about TV violence. This may reflect a conflict in religious and media messages. This area deserves future attention to better identify the role religion plays in an individual’s attitude toward TV violence.

Based on the results of regression test (see Table 2), it is apparent that religiosity is the leading predictor of concern about TV violence, followed by gender and parental factors. That is, churchgoers, women and parents are more likely to be concerned about TV violence. Note that the amount of variance explained by this model is rather impressive ( $R^2$  is 0.142). Based on this

TABLE 2. Prediction Model of TV Violence Concern

	b	Beta	t	sig
Religiosity	0.108	0.234	4.570	<0.001
Gender	-0.345	-0.185	-3.684	<0.001
Parent	0.320	0.145	2.852	0.005
Constant	0.014			

df = 3      F = 19.322    p < 0.001  
R<sup>2</sup> = 0.142    Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.135

result, Hypothesis 2 is also partially supported (gender, parenthood, and religiosity).

## DISCUSSION

Portions of the first two hypotheses were supported by this study. First of all, women, parents and frequent churchgoers were found most concerned about media violence. Education and income level variables, contrary to expectations, did not appear significant in predicting concern level. Second, women, parents and those in higher education brackets were most likely to be aware of the “Pull the Plug” campaign. Hypothesis 3, the linkage between the awareness and the concern level, was not supported.

Even though it is not clear whether this model has included all of the important predictors, we have a good reason to believe that future campaign efforts should broaden concentration on these three characteristics—religiosity, gender and respondent’s role as parent. Of particular importance is addressing the apparent role that religion and church attendance play in escalating people’s level of concern toward TV violence. Perhaps consideration should be given to including churches as an additional message distribution channel in the future. Furthermore, the campaign should aim at increasing the public’s level of concern about TV violence, and then at advocating a change of TV viewing behavior, so the campaign’s ultimate goal may be achieved. The materials developed by the *North Carolina Coalition* are activity-centered and hence may not effectively alter people’s attitudes.

This study indicates that the grassroots approach of advocating for the limitation of violent media use has received a moderate level of success. Almost one-third of people responding to this survey reported that they have heard of the campaign. With limited budget and human resources, the group’s volunteer endeavor is impressive enough for communication researchers to ponder

an alternative means of coping with the media violence issue. This study also found that awareness of the problems about media violence does not necessarily lead to attitude change. In addition, certain demographic attributes—gender, parenthood, education level and religiosity—are crucial in determining whether the advocated message is received and what level of concern people have toward the problem. In light of these findings, future campaign efforts should target people with certain demographic attributes and aim to alter their attitudes toward the problem with thoughtfully tailored information. Since gender was a contributing factor, campaign developers might consider using a tone that appeals to women, for example. Because religiosity also appears to be an influential factor, it may be of value to target religious groups. The current campaign design already taps into parents through the state's school systems, which should be maintained because mothers appear likely to get the information and respond.

Future efforts also need to focus on attitude shift toward the issue of media violence and change in people's viewing behavior—after all, extensive penetration of a campaign slogan is not equal to genuine success. In order to change people's views and behaviors, opportunities to advance personal persuasion might be added to the campaign project. For example, special talks, guest presentations, and theme workshops about media violence and its impact on individuals and the society at large could be arranged and incorporated into various activities of existing organizations. The current close nexus between the local grassroots group and the state's education system should be retained to continue reaching parents who are most involved in monitoring and changing children's media use behavior.

If people's TV viewing behavior and program preferences can eventually be shifted by those grassroots efforts, then the impact of violence portrayed on the silver screen will be expected to diminish. This large-scale behavior change of media use may ultimately influence the media industries and force them to transform their current programming strategies. Since commercial media firms need to reach the audience in order to lure advertisers' endorsements, loss of audience share could result in modified programming to target new tastes or preferences. In other words, changing audience media use patterns can generate a "trickle up" impact on media content, such as curtailing the dose of violence in programming, a long-standing goal of child advocates. As experts have indicated repeatedly, government regulations and industry self-regulation have not been highly effective—politics, media interests, and First Amendment protection all play a strong role. Therefore, a trickle-up endeavor through grassroots participation may be an effective alternative for the future.

## NOTES

1. In late 1998, the efforts of the *North Carolina Coalition for Pulling the Plug on Media Violence* were absorbed by LimiTV.
2. The following campaign-related questions were posed: "How concerned are you about the amount of violence depicted on TV shows?" and "Have you ever heard of a campaign called 'Pull the Plug on Media Violence'?"

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