

Marcus SCHAECHTER

Director-General, ZDF

A famous son of our host country, the Swiss dramatist Friedrich Dürrenmatt, taught us in his play "The Physicists" that the best way of examining complex and multifaceted phenomena is to formulate a series of hypotheses. The subject of violence in society and in the media is indeed such a complex and multifaceted phenomenon. So I, too, want to approach this subject by formulating some hypotheses.

1. Violence has existed in all known forms of society since the dawn of humankind. As Francois Dubet once said, violence is one of the "most persistent social facts".
2. Nevertheless, September 11th 2001 marked a caesura in the long history of social violence. For the terrorist attacks in New York have undeniably caused the world to rethink its attitudes towards violence. This also applies to the portrayal of violence in the media.
3. Although research into the impact of media violence is heterogeneous and has arrived at varying conclusions, the widely publicised claim that media violence leads directly to heightened aggression among recipients is not confirmed by empirical studies. On the other hand, studies have refuted the hypothesis that media violence has no impact at all. It is probable that media violence - depending on the recipients' family and social setting, their specific personality and the type and context of the violence being shown – can have a negative impact, especially among problem groups in society.
4. This possibility alone is a sufficient reason for the media to treat violence with the highest degree of social responsibility. Another reason is our duty to protect children and young people - a duty that ultimately derives from the fundamental principle of full protection of human dignity which applies world-wide.
5. Since, however, violence is part of social reality and everyday human experience, its portrayal should not be excluded from the media. Taking a socially responsible attitude to media violence cannot, therefore, mean a general refusal to show it.
6. Rather, violence in the media's entertainment programmes, especially in films, has always had a dramaturgical relevance. Violence plays a role not only in action and horror movies or in gangster and spy films ; dramas, romances and comedies may also need an element of fictional violence. It generates tension, engages the viewer in the story at an emotional level and, by doing so, can generally provoke the viewer into forming an opinion and adopting an attitude.
7. In principle, therefore, fictional violence must be analysed in terms of its dramaturgical function. Its justification must flow from its concrete role in a particular dramatic context. It must not be used in the media purely gratuitously or speculatively. Nor should violence ever be presented as the key to solving problems successfully ; and it must not be trivialised or presented as socially acceptable.
8. These are elementary "standards of a dramaturgical grammar" in the field of media entertainment. Considered together with the need for entertainment programmes to convey social and human values, they constitute some of the principles on which all radio and television broadcasters should be able to agree.
9. Such a "signal from Geneva" appears all the more desirable in view of the challenges of digitization now facing broadcasters, especially given the resulting channel proliferation and the potential for content selection.
10. Dürrenmatt wrote that "what concerns everyone can only be solved by everyone". So let us work together at this world summit to send out such a "signal from Geneva".