Were the growth in television viewing and the growth of violence in society during the 1960s and 1970s parallel developments or cause and effect? Was this a prime example of the evil influence of the intrusive box or of psychological need for a scapegoat? On both sides of the Atlantic research studies multiplied, but differences of opinion on their interpretation tended to exacerbate the controversy rather than clarify the issues. In a long-running and unresolved argument the broadcasters were forced on the defensive and required to prove their innocence.

ITV and its critics were both motivated by a strong belief in the power of television for good or evil. Few would have agreed with Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick, the ITA Chairman who shocked the Pilkington Committee by doubting the influence of television on the values and moral attitudes of society. Society, he had coolly observed, would be largely what it was with or without television. In support of this heresy he might have cited the example of Japan, where the incidence of violence on television was exceptionally high and in society exceptionally low. But common-sense suggested to most people that at least some television programmes exercised some harmful influence on some viewers. The real questions were, how often, how much and how many.

‘Conflict is of the essence of drama, and conflict often leads to violence in many forms, and when television seeks to reflect the world – in fact or fiction – it would be unrealistic and untrue to ignore its violent aspects.’ This justification of the portrayal of violence, whether physical, verbal or psychological, was published in *Television Programme Guidelines*, a collation of its rules and regulations issued by the Authority in September 1977 for the guidance of ITV’s programme-makers. Their attention was there drawn to the ITV Code on Violence, whose production and periodical review were among the responsibilities imposed on the Authority by Act of Parliament, where it was specified that special regard must be paid to programmes broadcast ‘when large numbers of children and young persons may be expected to be watching’. As the 1971 Code observed: ‘A civilised society pays special attention to its weaker members.’
Towards the end of the 1960s a wave of anti-television agitation had washed across the Atlantic from the United States where city riots, campus battles and the political assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King had roused alarm about the growing resort to violence. Consumer bodies protested vehemently about the high level of screened violence, which the competing networks, so far from denying, defended as a popular and profitable ingredient in their schedules.

On 23 September 1969 a US National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (chaired by Dr Milton S. Eisenhower) published its Statement on Violence in Television Entertainment Programs. This attracted wide attention, as did the US Surgeon General’s Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior which was set up in the same year and produced five volumes of inconclusive evidence at a cost of $1 million.

The Eisenhower Commission noted that there had been plenty of crime and violence in American society before the coming of television and uncovered no single explanation for its various causes. But it found research evidence which strongly suggested that violence in television programmes did have adverse effects on viewers, particularly children, and employed some harsh words about those responsible:

Each year advertisers spend $2.5 billion in the belief that TV can influence human behavior. The TV industry enthusiastically agrees with them, but nonetheless contends that its programs of violence do not have any such influence ... TV entertainment based on violence may be effective merchandising, but it is an appalling way to serve a civilisation.4

This argument ignored the distinction between advertisements, which are designed to persuade and sell, and programmes, which are not. But whether or not valid in the context of either American or British broadcasting, such sentiments fell on receptive ears in Britain, and broadcasters were obliged to take account of acceptance by an influential minority of the still unproven assumption of a causal connection between violence on television and violence in society. ITV’s Programme Policy Committee dwelt on the subject at meeting after meeting, especially in relation to the young. Was the accepted demarcation line between family and adult viewing times strictly enough observed? If 9 p.m. was right on weekdays, was 7.45 p.m. too early on Sundays? Should the watershed be standardised at 8 p.m. seven days a week?5

In May 1969 the first episode of Granada’s Big Breadwinner Hog, a fictional series portraying gang warfare in the East End of London, created a public hullabaloo. It showed in use, in convincing detail, the weapons actually employed in this kind of warfare, including an all-too-realistic