

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Thinking Critically About Media Violence: Does Media Violence Contribute To Real-World Violence?



The United States has one of the highest homicide rates among developed nations. While the overall crime rate has dropped in recent times, the occurrence of violent crimes involving children and adolescents has not declined. For Americans aged 15 to 34 years, homicide is the second leading cause of death, and for young African Americans, 15 to 24 years, it is the leading cause of death (Foege, Rosenberg and Mercy 1995). During recent times there has been passionate and ongoing debate about whether there is a causal relationship between media violence and aggression in society. Current events, especially in the United States, have highlighted the need to understand the nature and causes of domestic violence. Recent school killings have been shocking and naturally enough, debate continues on why such gratuitous violence does occur. Is violence an intrinsic part of human nature, something innate, or is it learned? Or is it both? Reflective persons everywhere look for causal connections and wonder if media violence is a causal factor and, if it is, how much does it contribute to real world violence.

Almost everyone has his or her own theory about what causes or contributes to violence. Among other theorists, this paper will focus primarily on the work of Sissela Bok (1998) and George Gebner (1993). They have for a long time been investigating the role of media violence as a contributing factor to real world violence. It is clear from the research that has been done that there are no easy, universally agreed upon answers. Some believe that focusing on media violence makes it easier for United States citizens to avoid or ignore more significant causes such as poverty, poor parenting, or the easy access to guns. Still many wonder if the United States culture always been as violent as it is today or is the media simply presenting Americans with a greater exposure to violence, wherever it occurs, for purely economic reasons? Good news, we all know, is not particularly exciting. It neither sells newspapers nor boosts TV ratings. Bad news,

on the other hand, events such as murders, rapes, assaults, and general mayhem, does sell. "If it bleeds, it leads," as the media adage goes.

During the nineteenth century, educators and others warned about the effects of lurid dime novels and newspaper crime stories on the young. In the early twentieth century, motion pictures and radio were both viewed as significant social threats. Today, concerns are expressed about violence in computer games, popular songs, and on the Internet. Throughout the evolving changes in media technology, some fundamental questions remain the same: Do depictions of violence in the media somehow contribute to real-life violence such as the Jonesboro and Littleton tragedies in the United States? Are viewers of media violence encouraged to commit real world violence?

Those of us involved in the teaching of critical thinking know how difficult it is to make convincing causal arguments. In thinking about media violence and its effects none of us wishes to be accused of committing either "the post hoc, ergo propter hoc," or the oversimplified cause fallacies. Hopefully both of these fallacies will be avoided in the discussion that follows, and an argument will be made that media violence is a significant contributing factor to real world violence.

Causal arguments about a general relation between two things such as that between smoking and lung cancer, relate to the causal effects in an entire population. This means generally that a certain factor "X" causes a higher rate of factor "Y" in the population as a whole, not that every individual who uses X will get Y. Consider, for example, the claim that cigarette smoking causes cancer. This does not imply that everyone who smokes will get cancer. Rather it means that smoking cigarettes causes a higher rate of cancer in people who smoke as opposed to people who don't smoke. Also when one talks about a cause factor, one need not mean to suggest that it is a necessary or sufficient condition.

Smoking cigarettes, for example, is not a necessary condition for getting cancer (even lung cancer). People who do not smoke can get lung cancer. Smoking cigarettes is also not a sufficient condition for getting cancer. Some rare individuals may smoke cigarettes nearly every day of their lives, and live to be a hundred without getting cancer, as the late American comedian George Burns did. So cigarette smoking is neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of getting lung cancer. Rather, we might say that cigarette smoking is a contributory factor in developing cancer for a population of people who smoke, raising their risk of acquiring cancer. For most of us the evidence constitutes good grounds for not

smoking. Are we prepared now to say that media violence causes real world violence or that is in some way a contributory factor as so many studies indicate and the public seems to believe?

As the Center for Media Literacy argues “The never-ending debate about media violence has been fueled by one unanswerable question: ‘Does watching violence cause someone to become violent?’ The reason we’ve gotten nowhere on this issue for 40 years,” the Center continues, “is because this is the wrong question to ask about violence. The real question the Center claims is “What is the long-term impact on our national psyche when millions of children, in their formative years, grow up decade after decade bombarded with very powerful visual and verbal messages that demonstrate violence as the preferred way to solve problems and normalizing fear and violence as ‘the ways things are?’ (Center for Media Literacy, 2002). Of course, this rhetorical question does not prove anything but it does make us wonder perhaps if we have become desensitized to the violence that we see.

In her recent book, *Mayhem; Violence as Public Entertainment*, Sissela Bok contributes to the debate, with special focus on works produced, marketed, and consumed as entertainment violence, for pleasure, excitement, and thrill. She wonders if they contribute to callousness and violent crime, as large majorities of Americans tell pollsters, or do they merely provide harmless amusement? In either case, might such works also help viewers confront and deal with violence in real life, perhaps informing them better or satisfying some deep-seated need that might otherwise find more brutal expression? Is it alarmist or merely sensible to ask with Bok about what happens to the souls of children nurtured, as in no past society, on images of rape, torture, bombings, and massacre that are channeled into their homes from infancy?

There’s nothing new about the attraction of violence - people have been thrilled by it since the beginning of time. As Bok points out, however, it is only in the last five decades that it has become possible for people to tune in to violent programming with graphic immediacy on home screens at all hours of the day and night (Bok 1998:51). Television brings into most homes news reports of rape, torture, and murder worldwide, rebroadcasting the most brutal scenes such as the Rodney King beating or the Oklahoma City Bombing over and over until they become burned in the mind’s eye. In some cities what has been called the “Mayhem Index” - the percentage of local news reporting that deals with violent topics such as crime, war, terrorism, and disaster - reaches levels over 75 percent. And

during the 1990s, while the homicide rate dropped in the United States, network evening news coverage escalated: between 1993 and 1996, it soared by an average 721 percent, compared with the three previous years.

There are many ways, Bok tells us, by which attempts are made to cutoff debate about violence: Some of the more important ones are:

a. Violence cannot be defined specifically enough. Some define it broadly others narrowly. Line drawing is needed, she tells us. We need some agreed upon baseline minimal definition. She suggests the Oxford English definition: violence is “the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury or damage to persons or property.” So portrayals of such violence would then constitute media violence.

b. Another argument holds that our (American) society is so inherently violent (our country’s history of slavery, frontier violence, labor strife, racial conflict, crime and warfare) that debates about media violence are largely beside the point. Who could possibly imagine that policies with respect to media violence could have much effect on attitudes so ingrained in our national psyche? It’s true that America has the highest level of homicide among advanced industrial democracies, but many developing societies have homicide rates several times that of the U.S., Colombia, South Africa, and Russia, are three countries in the lead. Bok claims that invoking perennial American patterns does nothing but obscure inquiry into explanations for present levels of violence and into contributing factors and remedies.

Perhaps the most important objection is that blaming the media, making it the scapegoat for violence, diverts attention from the true roots of violence. Anyone looking for causes of rampant violence in American society, one author holds, would do better to stick to the familiar list: poverty, racism, parental violence, the ready accessibility of guns. There is little political will for a war on poverty, guns or family breakdown. Instead, one author contends, we are offered a crusade against media violence... a feel- good exercise, a moral panic substituting for practicality. Political leaders, these writers claim, exploit public concern over media violence to avoid dealing with more pressing social problems.

Such challenges, Bok holds (1998:5-10), are valuable insofar as they caution against exclusive focus on media violence, or indeed on guns or any single factor. There is clearly good reason, she holds, to address the role of each and every one. To concentrate on media violence, in an effort to understand societal violence more generally, would be not only mistaken, but also dangerous. But it would be

equally misguided to allow such claims to block any concern with media violence or with any other risk factor until all the other problems contributing to societal violence have been adequately dealt with.

Complex multidimensional human problems cannot be effectively addressed in this manner. "Take heart disease:" she tells us, "No one maintains that just because a number of risk factors such as smoking and heredity and cholesterol contribute to the prevalence of this disease, we should focus on no single one of them or on the ways in which they interact. Instead research and public health policy must continue to take each into account, including those of lesser magnitude. So long as media violence is not seen as the only contributing factor, moreover, the claim that paying attention to it 'represents an easy way' out is beside the point. Why not address the easier as well as the harder aspects of the problem?" she contends.

The Impact of Media Violence

There have been literally hundreds of studies done on the impact of media violence. One headed by Al Austin from PBS's Frontline and his associate, Leonard Eron, a psychologist was begun in 1960. This study is reported in PBS's Frontline documentary entitled "Does TV Kill?" In the program Austin and his crew set up video cameras to record some of the children in Eron's study while they watched television.

In 1960 Eron interviewed 835 third graders in Hudson, New York. He found the more violent the TV programs they watched at home; the more aggressive they were in school. He came back in 1971, and again in 1980, to re-interview the same subjects and found that a higher proportion of those who had been heavy consumers of TV violence as children turned out to have problems with violence in late adolescence and early adulthood. The more aggressive they were at eight, the more aggressive they tended to be at thirty: they logged more arrests and more criminal convictions, were more aggressive in their homes, and had more aggressive children.

Returning again in 1993 Eron's interviews confirmed his earlier findings about the links between television viewing and higher levels of aggression. For most reporters following Eron's study the greatest revelation was not about the role of television violence but "the stupefying amount that people watch". It was only five decades ago that the first American families acquired their first television sets. By now 98 percent of households have television, and a majority of children have sets

in their bedrooms (Murray 1994:811). The typical American household has the television set on for more than seven (7) hours a day, and children ages ten to eleven watch it on an average of three to four hours a day. With TVs in their own bedrooms, children have become more isolated from their parents: the time spent by parents with their children has continued to dwindle; a 1992 study shows that children have lost ten to twelve hours per week of parental time compared with 1960.

Sizing-Up the Effects

A great deal of research has been done to sort out the kinds and amounts of violence in the media and to learn how exposure to media violence affects viewers, and especially children. Focusing primarily on children, they all confirm the common sense observation that the screen is a powerful teaching medium, for good and ill, when it comes to violence as to all other materials. The following summarizes the 1993 report by the American Psychological Association on media violence, which claims

a. There is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior.

b. Aggressive habits learned early in life are the foundation for later behavior.

c. Aggressive children who have trouble in school and in relating to peers tend to watch more television; the violence they see there, in turn, reinforces their tendency towards aggression, compounding their academic and social failure. These effects are both short-term and long lasting. What a child sees as an eight years old can have effects such as serious violent criminal offenses and spouse abuse 22 years later - a longitudinal study showed.

a. Even those who do not themselves increase their violent behaviors are significantly affected by their viewing of violence in 3 further ways;

1. Viewing violence increases fear of becoming a victim of violence, with a resultant increase in self-protective behaviors and increased mistrust of others,

2. Viewing violence increases desensitization to violence, resulting in calloused attitudes towards violence directed at others and a decreased likelihood to take action on behalf of the victim when violence occurs (behavioral apathy) and

3. Viewing violence increases viewers' appetites for becoming involved with violence or exposing themselves to violence.

This report, like most of the research that it surveys, speaks of viewing violence

as correlated with effects rather than as directly causing them. And it specifies a number of risk factors capable of contributing to the first of these effects - increased aggression. Among these contributing risk factors, are access to firearms, substance abuse, and the experience of abuse as a child. These latter factors doubtless play a larger role than media violence.

Psychologist Richard Slaby, a member of the APA report committee, has named these effects "the aggressor effect, the victim effect, the bystander effect, and the appetite effect. Not all these effects, he suggests occur for all viewers; much depends on how they identify themselves in relation to the violence they see and on their ability to evaluate such programs critically (Slaby1993:1). The American Academy of Pediatrics, the AMA, and the National PTA are among the many organizations signaling such effects and calling for reduced levels of television violence and greater parental involvement with children's viewing.

In the early 1990's researchers frequently mentioned the estimate that the average child leaving elementary school has watched 8,000 murders and more than 100,000 acts of violence. Because network television was for decades the primary source for screen violence in most homes, its role has been especially carefully charted in this regard. In recent years, growing access to numerous cable channels, slasher and gore films on video, and video games offering players the chance to engage in vicarious carnage of every sort, add greatly to the amount of violence to which viewers now have access. As a result, it may well be necessary to revise the earlier figures sharply upward (Hamburg 1992:192).

Taking a closer at the four effects:

A. Fear

Even though the first effect on the public - increased levels of aggression - the other three have a more widespread and debilitating impact on adults as well as children. Exposure to media violence is often singled out as among the factors contributing to the heightened fearfulness, but concern has been directed also at the depression, and pessimism that affect a far greater proportion of children and young people today than in the past.

Studies show that the sense that threats abound in the outside world is common among heavy TV viewers of all ages. George Gerbner's studies show that "heavy viewers (more than three hours a day) are more likely to feel at high risk of victimization from violence, take their neighborhoods to be unsafe, and regard the world as 'mean and gloomy'" (Gerbner 1993:193).

As noted earlier newscasts play as large a role in the increased sense of fear as entertainment violence. The media have dwelt to a vastly disproportionate degree on rare forms of violence such as serial killing, terrorism, and kidnapping. Instant and long-continued media coverage of the most shocking crime stories, (such as the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman and that of JonBenet Ramsey), add to the sense of dread about dangers “out there” and help explain why a majority of Americans wrongly believe that crime is uniquely high and rising in the United States (Bok 1998:62).

Because disadvantaged youngsters in poor urban communities watch more TV than other children, they are more likely to experience fear and vulnerability, especially if violence in their own families or neighborhoods corroborates with what they see on the screen. Studies indicate that parents either fail to anticipate or even to notice their children’s fright responses to mass media, and that enduring, and sometimes severe emotional disturbances occur in a substantial proportion of children.

B. Desensitization

No one can possibly supply genuine compassion for all the disasters and epidemics and crimes witnessed on the screen. The multitudes of victims blur in many people’s minds; the more so if they feel unable to imagine how they might be of help even to a few sufferers. The result can be what has come to be called “compassion fatigue,” a state of mind that makes it possible to view violence as an uninvolved bystander (Bok:1998:68). Such compassion fatigue is often premature, but for individuals feeling bombarded by information about murder and mayhem, a measure of desensitization may be an increasingly indispensable psychological survival skill to avoid the resulting debilitating anxiety.

Bok argues that to the extent that people seek out violent programming for the enjoyment and the excitement that the violence itself can provide, to that degree they may run a higher risk of suppressing empathy – the crucial ability to feel with and for others and to respond to their suffering. For many philosophers, Kant, for example empathy and fellow feeling form the very basis of morality. The capacities for empathy, for feeling responsibility towards others, and for reaching out to help them can be stunted or undermined early on, depending on the child’s experiences in the home and neighborhood. When might violence, and especially entertainment violence, be most likely to counteract the normal development of resilience (the ability to bounce back) and empathy among children? The children most heavily exposed to such violence are at the greatest risk when they are

deprived of adequate parental empathy, nurturance and guidance (Bok 1998:70). What about adolescents and adults? Their own exposure to violence may make it easier for them to take a passive bystander's attitude when witnessing aggression and the infliction of pain. For example, research on college-age men who view films portraying violence against women suggests that the viewers became increasingly comfortable with the violent content of the films, eventually considering it less offensive and degrading to the victims and the films less violent than they had initially thought (Donnerstein, E., Slaby, R., & Eron, E. 1994:237). A growing proportion of young adults appear to perceive nothing problematic about TV violence. There is thus a "video violence" generation gap. Those under 30 are far less bothered by violence on TV, less likely to feel that violence is harmful to society than are older Americans.

The Third Effect: The Appetite for More Violence

Bok develops this effect with a description of a 14-year-old boy and his love for viewing violence. He spends more than \$100 a year at the arcade playing the latest version of Mortal Kombat and knows such moves as the "head inflation," the skull rip," and the "death scream." With his parents footing the bills, he spends far more than that on home versions of this and other games and on videos and movies. As parents of other youngsters attest, and as soaring sales figures for such games confirm, this boy's tastes are by no means unusual (Bok 1998:79).

Why be concerned? Isn't all this violence make-believe? It is their children's passionate involvement with violent programming along with their eerie lack of empathy toward suffering that causes growing numbers of parents to worry. They worry that the pleasure derived from such games may lead them to regard violence as a more acceptable way of dealing with problems and victimization as a more tolerable so long as it befalls others, not themselves. We are then left with the question of whether the appetite for violence also makes it easier for some people to shift from enjoying it on screen to resorting to it in real life.

The 4th Effect - Increased Levels of Aggression.

Media violence remains at the center of public debate because of the belief that it glamorizes aggressive behavior, removes inhibitions toward such conduct, arouses viewers, and invites imitation. Public concern about a possible link between media violence and societal violence has further intensified in the past decade, as violent crime reached a peak in the early 1990's, and yet has shown no

sign of downturn, even after crime rates began dropping in 1992.

When it comes to viewing violent pornography, levels of aggression towards women have been shown to go up among male subjects when they view sexualized violence against women. Viewers, who become accustomed to seeing violence as an acceptable, common, and attractive way of dealing with problems, find it easier to identify with the aggressors and to suppress any sense of pity or respect for victims of violence. In explicit depictions of sexual violence, a report by the American Psychological Association's Commission on Youth and Violence, concludes, it is the message about violence more than the sexual nature of the materials that appears to affect the attitudes of adolescents about rape and violence towards women (American Psychological Association 1993: 34). Media violence has been found to have stronger effects of this kind when carried out by heroic, impressive, or otherwise exciting figures, especially when they are shown as invulnerable and are rewarded, not punished for what they do.

While the consensus that such influence exists grows among investigators, as research accumulates, there is no consensus whatsoever about the sizes of the correlation involved. Most investigators agree that it will always be difficult to disentangle the precise effects of exposure to media violence from among the many other factors contributing to societal violence. Such tentative estimates that have been made suggest that the media account for between 5 and 15 percent of societal violence. As Bok warns us, however, these estimates are rarely specific enough to indicate whether what is at issue is all violent crime or such crimes along with bullying and aggression more generally (Bok 1998: 85). Although America's homicide rate has declined in the 1990s, the rates for suicide, rape, and murder involving children and adolescents in many regions have too rarely followed suit. For Americans aged 15 to 34 years, homicide is the second leading cause of death, and for African Americans, 15 to 24, it is the leading cause of death. In the decade following the mid-1980s, the rate of murder committed by teenagers 14 to 17 more than doubled.

Whatever role the media are found to play in this respect, to be sure, is but part of the problem. Obviously, not even the total elimination of media violence would wipe out the problem of violence in the United States or any other society. Nevertheless, the television screen is the lens through which most children learn about violence. Through the magnifying power of this lens, images of shooting, family violence, gang warfare, kidnappings, and everything that contributes to

violence in our society suffuse their everyday life. It shapes their experiences long before they have had the opportunity to consent to such shaping or developed the ability to cope adequately with this knowledge. I shall conclude with Bok, with her claim that "the basic nurturing and protection to prevent the impairment of this ability ought to be the birthright of every child" (Bok 1998:89).

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