

The Evil of Man

Michael Isaacson

Introduction

The topic of violence in the media has become one of the hottest debates of the decade. Recent events have forced it onto the front burner. The excessive amounts of violence on television, in movies, and in computer games has raised more than a few questions of its necessity. And its no wonder. With vulgar shows such as Jerry Springer, which is on Madison's WB right after cartoons, Howard Stern, Pokemon, Power Rangers, movies such as The Matrix, 8MM, Seven, Mulan, and video games like Quake 3, Unreal, and Half Life there is more violence in the media today than ever. Even children's shows have a record amount of violent content.

Many people feel that the government should step in and regulate the content on television. With recent events such as school shootings and riots the public is shouting for something to be done. The media industry, namely first person "shooter" games and Marylon Manson, has been blamed for causing these violent outbursts. However, regulation of media will not solve these problems.

Fundamental Issues

The first and foremost position of interest is the proven fact that violence in the media does NOT create violent people. In fact, it may really do the opposite, easing our violent tendencies rather than enhancing them. Some examples of these studies are ones such as those discussed in

“Is Mr. Pac Man eating our children?” and “The Implicit Assumptions of Television Research.” By using violence as entertainment (mainly video games, but certainly movies and television) it can be used as a tool to reduce stress, promote interactivity, enhance learning, and increase the general thought process.

Secondly, I looked at the grand history of violence. Throughout mankind’s past there have been epic struggles involving terrible violence. It is not very surprising that most of them have happened before the advent of mass media violence. The Reign of Terror, World War One and Two (including the holocaust), the American Revolution, the Turkish Invasion, the Huns, the Roman Conquest, the Spanish plundering of the Americas... All of these events in history were never seen on national television. In fact, it seems that the media can play an important part in actually preventing or stopping conflicts. A prime example of this is the Vietnam War, (Encarta). During that conflict, the politicians were greatly concerned about how the conflict *looked* to the public. This worry actually aided in pulling our troops out of the area. Now days, when information of world events can reach us instantly via TV or the internet, countries now have to deal with a severe problem of knowing that their actions are known to the entire world.

Next, we looked at the usage of rating systems to aid in the amount of violence that children, and adults, are exposed to. The movie industry has proven that simple rating systems, coupled with parental involvement, can create good protection for young viewers. The same is true for the current television ratings, “Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth.” There is the problem that the ratings are only flashed on the screen for a few seconds, unlike the movie ratings that are in bold text outside the box office, or printed on the box of videos. Another problem is that going to movies requires the patron to buy a ticket, where a child needs only to turn the TV on to see whatever they want.

Media Does Not Create Violence

The issues of the relationship of violence in the media industry and its effects on society have become hot topics in this modern age. Children have access information that their parents do not know about. Some of these may contain images that their parents may find objectionable. However, government regulation of this medium is a bad idea for many reasons.

First off is the unfounded belief that the depiction of violence in the media is a direct cause violence in reality. There have been many studies done in attempt to show this. However, for each one there is one that refutes this claim. The studies that try to show the correlation often leave out more prevalent and more important mental factors. These

include such things as general upbringing. How a child is raised has been proven as forming the mold of their personality. Even in infancy the child's personality is shaped from their surroundings. Touch and interactive communication is a vital part of the cranial development and formation of personality. If these practices are not carried out, the child can form dispositions to certain tendencies, including violence.

More and more it seems that the media is being blamed for society's problems and mistakes. The recent school shooting and riots have brought this onto the front burner. Today's mindset seems to be that of taking the easy, lazy way out. Today we don't even have to leave our chair to order pizzas, shop for homes, or start our car. We have become dependant on our convinces. It should be no surprise then that we our being exposed to more and more violence through the media. However, violence has been with humanity throughout our history, even well before mass media was available. Therefore, media should not be thought of as a cause of social unrest.

Plato wrote in "The Laws" that man in born evil and has to learn good. This profound idea has huge ramifications. The truth of this can be seen all around us. Often disputes are resolved by fistfights on our playgrounds. This sort of physical resolution, while it won't prove if Pikachu is better then Bulbasour, is used in attempt to strengthen the opinion of the victor. Children learn this behavior very quickly and early in life. Infants have been observed to use physical violence to steal toys

from other infants in lab tests. The process of removing this seemingly built in mechanism is a difficult process and many times does not work. Classes on violence control and almost constant intervention of adults in squabbles can result in moderation of these events, and may even help stop future ones from occurring. Sadly though, in many cases these social skills go uneducated.

The History of Violence

Throughout mankind's history, physical brutality has been a method to solve problems. This instinct stems from our primitive need to defend ourselves from predators. In short, it is a survival tactic. Off of this basic need to survive comes the need for control. How often have you heard the line "I want to control my own destiny?" With tools man has started to control nearly everything, rivers have been rerouted, people fly through the sky, and organizations dictate its underlings. The underlying greed for this level of control drives the lives of many and influences the lives of many more.

More often then not, this struggle has left a path of destruction and death in its wake. The crucifixion of Christ was successful on a lie driven by greed. The Romans harshly expanded their empire of control by plundering the countryside for wealth. The Crusades (all of them) started out as a holy quest, but soon most solders joined the army because of the promise of good spoils. In America, the Salem witch trials had normal

citizens cheering burnings of their neighbors. Similar to this, the Reign of Terror in France had masses and masses out in the squares cheering as people lost their heads. All of these events of old had no mass media coverage, we not glamorized with 3D special effects or enhanced by Dobby DTS 6 channel surround sound. This helps point the finger away from the media scapegoat and back on the real issues of our world, how to calm the beast within.

In more recent times, the media has been used in such a way to stop conflicts, not promote them. This was illustrated one of the first times in World War II. Though television played a very minor role, other media played to inform the masses of what was going on in the war. Newspapers were key in keeping public awareness at a high level so citizens could take actions, such as protesting, lobbying, and working to bring the war to a speedy close. Also, war is a huge economical machine. The Great Depression was brought to an end through WWII. This was a perfect excuse for the US to enter into the conflict.

Television played a larger role in bringing the troops out of Vietnam. Graphic, violent scenes were brought back and shown, letting the common man see the hard truths of war. Seeing these atrocities had the same, though much more powerful effect, as they did during the last World War. The large scale protests showed our displeasure over the conflict. Many felt that the United States entered too early into the war and didn't do enough diplomatic options. Troops were sent not only to

protect our fellow democratic neighbors, but also to show that the United States can flex its muscles outside the western hemisphere. Troops were sent to fight the invaders, but were kept there because American politicians were too stubborn to call them back, according to many writers at the time.

Other events that were helped put down through media include the Golf War, Northern Ireland religious conflict, Bosnia, and many others. But more than why these conflicts were ended, we must look at why they were started. Some were started for reasons of greed, such as the Golf War, while others were started because of a desire to be freed from oppression, such as in Bosnia. Short tempers add to a hot situation and soon it explodes, ending in the deaths of many.

Media Violence as a Tool

While there can be almost no disagreement that physical violence is morally wrong, the question about virtual violence is still a heated debate. As stated earlier, it is human nature to be violent. What needs to be discovered is an acceptable way to dispel that aggression in a safe way. Media violence could be one of those options. Sports and general exercise can relieve some tensions, but not all. There exists a primitive need to be violent. Denying our nature is to deny our history and basic instincts. Some good options do exist for this release. Violent movies such as *Ghost in the Shell*, *Seven*, *The Matrix*, *True Lies*, and others allow

us to imagine ourselves doing something that we know we could not do in real life. Most of us respect the laws regarding violent acts and also act on our own morals to stop us from murdering others. By watching it played out for us, the physiological effects are similar to those if we had actually carried out the acts ourselves. Now, in defense of the movie industry, many movies contain no violence at all and do very well at the box office.

This idea is carried out to an even higher level with video games. By allowing the viewer to participate in the action heightens the experience. Being able to blast away virtual characters has been found to relieve a lot of stress and improve hand-eye coordination. Many games today, built on the ever increasing speed of the internet, allow users to play with other real people. Many of these games include team play options, which help build teamwork skills. However, some see these games as more bad than good. They see the frantic running around and blasting away threatening digital monsters as practice for carrying out the acts in the real world. And God knows the gaming industry has tried to put these fears to rest.

One interesting fact about the video game industry is that a very large number of games sold have no violent content at all. Epic's 3D Ultra Pinball was on the top 10 sellers list for over a year. The most popular game ever was Myst, which accounted for over fifty per cent of all CD-ROM sales the year it came out. Myst contains no violence at all.

Government Should Stay out of the Media

With all the recent outbursts of violence, especially among children, the populace is demanding something be done to hold back the tide of chaos. One of the easiest ways is to have the government regulate the images we see for us. However, this passive approach will not solve anything and thus should not be considered.

If we allow the government to regulate media violence, we may lose some great tools. Stations like The History Channel and movies such as Saving Private Ryan are designed to educate, not solely to entertain. If we regulate violence, it is nearly impossible to decide what is just entertainment and what is educational. If the educational programs are removed from the airwaves, more problems may be caused than solved. It is a common saying that to improve our future we must learn from our past. Twenty-twenty hind sight is the best sight of all. If we block the lessons of the past, we are bound to make the same mistakes again, but perhaps on a potentially larger scale. The inability to distinguish between educational and entertaining programming makes censoring impossible.

Some alternatives to censorship, which would breach the first amendment, are options to self regulate. Technology such as the V-Chip, channel blocking on cable and satellite, and a rating system allow parents to actively monitor what their children are watching. Of course any

system, even government regulation, has loopholes. Children can go to a friend's house to view programs forbidden by their parents.

There are other options to monitoring what young viewers see. The easiest is to simply turn off the TV. Studies show that average children spend more time per week in front of the television than they do at school. Other options for busy parents include after school programs, which are often cheap or free, community programs such as the YMCA and United Way.

While there is a large amount of violence on television, in the movies, and in video games, there is no need for the government to step in and regulate it. Other means to control access can be more effectively implemented, such as rating systems and tools to help parents control what their children see. By taking an active part in the lives and development of our youngsters, we can then take the next steps to put down the resident evil in us all.

Bibliography

"Is Mr. Pac Man eating our children? A review of the effect of video games on children." Emes, CE. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, May 1997;42(4):409-14.

Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties, vol.1, US Department of Health and Human Services, 1982.

Cook, T.D., Kendzierski, D.A., Thomas, S.V.. The Implicit Assumptions of Television Research: An Analysis of the 1982 NIMH Report on Television and Behavior, Public Opinion Quarterly, vol. 47:161-201, 1983.

Youth Indicators 1993: Trends in the Well-Being of American Youth, U.S. Department of Education, Office of Education Research and Improvement, NCES 93-242.

Koop, C. Everett, Lundberg, George D., Violence in America: A Public Health Emergency, JAMA, June 10, 1992, vol.267: 3075-3076.

Langan, P.A., Innes, C.A., *The Risk of Violent Crime*, (Bureau of Justice Statistics Special Report, NCJ977119) Washington, D.C., Government Printing Office.

Straus, M., Normative and behavioral aspects of violence between spouses: Preliminary data on a nationally representative USA sample. Paper at Symposium on Violence In Canadian Society, Simon Frazer University, Burnaby, B.C., Canada, March 12, 1977

Straus, M., Gelles, R., Steinmetz, S.K., *Behind Closed Doors: Violence in the American Family*, Anchor Press, Garden City, NY, 1980.

U.S. Department of Justice, *Intimate victims: A study of violence among friends and relatives*, Washington, D.C., Government printing Office, 1980.

McCall, G.J., Shields, N., Social and structural factors in family violence, In: M. Lystad (ed.) *Violence in the home: Interdisciplinary perspectives*, Brunner-Mazel, New York, 1986.

Widom, C.S., Does Violence Beget Violence? A Critical Evaluation of the Literature, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol.106, no.1, 3-28, 1989.

Widom, C.S., The Cycle of Violence, *Science*, 244:160-165, 1989.

Grove, W.R., Crutchfield, R.D., The Family and Juvenile Delinquency, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 23:301-319, 1982.

Hirschi, T., *Causes of Delinquency*, UC Berkley, Berkley, CA, 1969.

Bureau of Justice Statistics Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 1993, eds: Maguire, Kathleen, Pastore, Ann L., U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, NCJ-148211

Friedrich-Cofer, Lynette, Huston, Aletha C., Television Violence and Aggression: The Debate Continues, *Psychological Bulletin*, 1986, Vol.100: 364-371.

Himmelweit, Hilde T., Oppenheim, A.N., Vince, Pamela, *Television and the Child*, Oxford University Press, London, 1958.

Osborn, S.G., West, D.J. The effectiveness of various predictors of criminal careers, *Journal of Adolescence*, 1978, 1:101-117.

Stevenson, Harold W., Television and the Behavior of Preschool Children, In: Television and Social Behavior, Volume II: Television and Social Learning, A Technical Report to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior (eds.) Murray, J.P., Rubinstein, E.A., Comstock, G.A., U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, NIMH, 1972.

Belson, W. (1978) Television violence and the adolescent boy, Hampshire, England: Saxon House.

Huesmann, L.R., (1982). Television violence and aggressive behavior. In: D. Pearl, L. Bouthilet, & J. Lazar (eds), Television and behavior; Ten years of scientific progress and implications for the eighties: Vol.2, Technical Reviews (pp220-256), Washington, D.C., NIMH

Roper, William L., December, 10, 1990, Atlanta, GA., Keynote Address, Forum on Youth Violence in Minority Communities: Setting the Agenda for Prevention, In: Public Health Reports, vol.106:225-277

Olweus, Dan. Stability of Aggressive Reaction Patterns in Males: A Review, Psychological Bulletin, 1979,vol. 86:852-875.

Aggression and Peer Acceptance in Adolescent Boys: Two Short-Term Longitudinal Studies of Ratings, *Child Development*, 1977, 48:1301-1313.

Krattenmaker, T.G., Powe, Jr., L.A., *Televised Violence: First Amendment Principles and Social Science Theory*, *Virginia Law Review*, 64:1123-1298. 1978.

Television and Social Behavior, Reports and Papers, A Technical Report to the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior, Vol1-5, HEW, NIMH, 1972. Federal stock number: 1724-0195.

American Academy of Pediatrics “Some Things You Should Know About Media Violence and Media Literacy”

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/childhealthmonth/media.htm>, Nov 1999.

National Coalition on TV Violence (June-August 1991), "Violence in Cartoons Increases," *NCTV News*, 12, p.7

Chen, Milton Ph.D. (1994) *The Smart Parent's Guide to Kid's TV*. San Francisco: KQED Books, p.83

Silverblatt, Art (1995) *Media Literacy: Keys to Interpreting Media Messages* Praeger: London, p.278

“The Vietnam War,” Microsoft Encarta '96. 1996.