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Television violence : the impact and influence on children and adolescents

Abstract

This paper will look at the history of violent youth, and the unique development of youth violence in our country. The author will examine the unique characteristics that make media such a powerful communicative source. The author will show how living in a media culture affects the way youth behave, and will explore the extent to which media messages have power over their lives. Information on the significance of television violence on the behaviors of youth will be included.

Television Violence: The Impact and Influence
on Children and Adolescents

Graduate Paper

Submitted to the

Division of Educational Technology

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirement for the Degree

Master of Arts

University Of Northern Iowa

By

Preston B. Hoskins

May 6, 2000

This Review By: Preston B. Hoskins
Television Violence: The Impact and Influence on Children and Adolescents

Has been approved as meeting the research requirement for the
Degree of Master of Arts.

June 9, 2000
Date Approved

June 9, 2000
Date Approved

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Introduction

This paper will look at the history of violent youth, and the unique development of youth violence in our country. The author will examine the unique characteristics that make media such a powerful communicative source. The author will show how living in a media culture affects the way youth behave, and will explore the extent to which media messages have power over their lives. Information on the significance of television violence on the behaviors of youth will be included.

Many people and organizations have examined the effects of television violence by our youth. The author of this study will include research from the following sources: The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior; National Institute of Mental Health Television and, the American Psychological Association Task Force on Television and Society. In addition, research by the following authors will also be presented: George Comstock, Madeline Levine, and Wendy L. Josephson. The combined works of many authors in the book: *Children and the faces of television*, by Edward P. Palmer and Aimee Dorr will be examined.

Doerken (1983) stated "Vast television consumption itself appears to be a preeminent American activity" (p.15). The impact of television violence and its effect on the social behavior of youth is a real problem. In response to the violent programming, Doerken believes that "Hollywood and the networks are doing more than simply entertaining the American public and giving it what it wants" (p.14).

Studies of the effects of television violence on the behavior, attitudes, development, and mental health of the nation's children had begun as early as 1954 (Doerken, 1983). One of the first surveys dealing with TV violence was done in 1950 by

the Los Angeles based organization, National Listeners Council. In their examination of one week of television programming, the one dominant technique used to entertain viewers was television violence. In the survey the following types of violence were shown: numerous murders, holdups, kidnappings, killings by explosion, suicides, thefts, burglaries, arson, blackmail, and incidents of assault and battery, brawls, drunkenness, and crooked judges, sheriffs, and juries (Doerken, 1983).

Ten years later television violence in this country continues to increase in the amount of violent acts shown. Doerken (1983) states "Not only was there a greater quantity of violence on the screen, but more people were watching it as well" (p.31). Today 40 years later, violent injury and death excessively affect children, adolescents, and young adults in the United States.

The number of juveniles murdered peaked in 1993 at 2,900 victims and by 1997, that figure dropped to 2,100. "Although murders in general have reached a 26-year low, the number of juvenile murders in 1997 was still substantially above the level of the mid-1980's, when about 1,600 juveniles were murdered annually" says Howard Snyder, co-author of the report (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999, p.56).

In a report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1996) what has changed most dramatically over the past 20 years has been the emergence of fatal youth violence --children killing children.

The 1990s have seen the creation of a youth culture which seems to hunger for violence. A large collection of literature has linked exposure to violent television with increased physical aggressiveness among children and violent youth.

The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee (1972) conducted one such study. The study, which covers twenty years of research, has concluded that viewing violent acts through film or television "increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior." Television violence in particular has created a generation of children so violent that the fundamental social structure of our country has turned upside down.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (1995) conducted one such study. The study addresses the issue of television violence and real life violence. The authors state "The vast majority of studies conclude that there is a cause-and-effect relationship between media violence and real-life violence" (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995, p.1).

Levine (1996) states "Television has become a powerful environmental source of behaviors, attitudes, and values. In many homes, it threatens the traditional triumvirate of socialization family, school, and church" (p.7). It is as if they have been taken to a place where they begin to see everything as irrelevant and to act out on some of the most grotesque fantasy imaginable. Levine states "America has become the most violent nation in the industrialized world" (p. 4).

Is it a coincidence that, as American media shows more and more graphic violence, the rate of occurrences of violent acts in our society increases? Kozy (1996) states "Violence in children is learned indirectly through practice of parenting and schooling, and directly through the hypnosis of television" (p.43).

Our country rates number one in the extent of violence seen by the young. Strasburger (1995) states "American television and movies are the most violent in the world" (p.21).

Strasburger (1995) argues that the relationship of viewing violence on television acts as a "risk factor" which contributes to the increasing of aggressive behavior and attitude in the American youth. Strasburger (1995) argues that there is a correlation between watching television and acting out aggressively, even if only a casual correlation.

Strasburger (1995) concludes that documented research, studies, and the recent onslaught of teen killings, show that there is a proportional relationship between television violence and violent behavior of youth.

It is the purpose of this paper to examine what the magnitude of youth violence in America is, and the extent to which television violence contributes to that violence.

A number of questions are asked:

1. What consequences have been linked to viewing TV violence?
2. What perceptions of the world are attained by viewing TV violence?
3. What reaction do we see from viewing TV violence?

The paper is based on the argument that television violence in our country has been identified as one of the variables contributing to the aggressive behaviors and attitudes of youth in America.

The intent is to address the issue that youth violence in America has escalated to such an extent that we need to identify the cause and effect contributing to this phenomena; and although media violence is not the leading cause of real life violence, it certainly plays a critical role and is fairly easy to change.

The starting point of the analysis will be to concentrate on the behaviors that are constructed through viewing television violence. The aim is to try to explain that

behavior, and to what extent television violence contributed to real world violence. It must be understood from the onset of this paper that not all violence is caused by the media, be it television, video games, or music but that media can contribute significantly to violent acts. The particular way that violence originally manifests itself is not the only critical point here, but how media contributes to it as well. Evaluation of past as well as present research will be covered in an attempt to understand present assumptions.

Although television violence is not solely responsible for aggressive tendencies and antisocial behavior it is among the risk factors involved.

However, this author wants to show that television violence is one of the risk factors in the development of aggressive behavior and attitudes in youth. " One researcher asserts that long-term exposure to television is a casual factor in approximately half of all homicides in the United States; therefore, 10,000 homicides could be prevented annually if television were less violent" (Strasburger, 1995, p. 20).

The review will include inspection of the effects of violence, current statistics, examples of youth violence and how media violence is being combated in our nation.

Through the 1990s, the United States has witnessed how an ever-increasing portion of its youth has become involved in progressively violent acts. The repetition of these acts of violence has captured the attention of our communities, city government, and has even reached the White House.

What children or adolescents growing up in the past several decades have not been exposed to significant amounts of time spent on television? Many studies have been done to demonstrate media's ability to transmit information and to shape social attitudes.

One such study work on the effect of television violence is that of Molitor (1994) of Bowling Green State University. In his paper he documents four studies that give insight on the effects of viewing media violence. Findings from the experiments he conducted showed that those children who watched a violent program instead of a nonviolent one were slower to intervene or to call for help when they saw younger children fighting or playing destructively (p.191-194).

Bandura (as cited in Levine, 1996) did research on the effects of media violence on children. His study indicated that children who watch television for a long time are less aroused by violent scenes than those who only watch a little; in other words, they are less bothered by violence in general, and less likely to act out as did the child who watched more violent scenes. These are the same documented conclusions, which were achieved by Drabman and Thomas in their research (cited in Levine, 1996). Strasburger (1995) states " Exposure to entertainment violence does make young people more indifferent to the plight to others. but it also arouses them more, thus increasing the chances of aggressive behavior" (p.31).

On February 2, 1996, Barry Loukaitis, 14, walked into a junior-high algebra class and opened fire with a hunting rifle, killing the teacher and two students. Eight months later, in Pearl, Mississippi, a sixteen-year-old stabbed his mother, and, in December the same year, in West Paducah, Kentucky, three students, were killed and five wounded in the school hallway. There were four more incidents: one in 1998, and three in 1999, including the Littleton, Colorado incident, where on April 20, two heavily armed young men went on a killing spree at a Denver area high school, shooting and killing as many as 25 students and faculty members (Washington Post, 1999).

Violence in America has become widespread and our nation has had to confront it, as we can see on a daily basis. On Tuesday, March 2, 2000, we saw yet another violent killing in Mount Morris Township, Michigan. The participants in the tragedy were 6 years old. This time one of them, a little girl, died after being shot once in the head (Pioneer Press, 2000).

Strasburger (1995) cites three theories on how television affects children and adolescents' behavior:

1. Zillmans's (1997) excitation or arousal theory holds that excitement produced by media exposure may transfer to other ongoing activities, thus heightening the intensity of what ever emotion is in play at the time.
2. Berkowitz's (1984) cognitive neoassociation theory holds that vicarious media experiences may either encourage or inhibit behavior by invoking certain association; images, or thoughts
3. Huesman's (1986) theory of cognitive scripting Proposes that television programs provide young people with behavior scripts that can be retrieved at any time. (p. 8-10)

Strasburger (1995) states "Imitation of media displayed behaviors may be direct and immediate, or it may be delayed and more subtle. When imitation is direct and immediate, it often makes headlines" (p. 8).

There are at least three negative consequences attributed to children's viewing of television violence:

1. Violent behavior
2. Distorted perceptions of reality

3. Toleration of real-life aggressive behavior (Molitor, 1994, p191-194).

Levine (1996) and Comstock (1993) and Strasburger (1992) state that media violence affects children in the following ways:

1. Increased aggressiveness and anti-social behavior
2. Increased fear of the world and becoming of victims
3. Decreased sensitivity to violence and to victims of violent acts

This is increased assumption of more violent acts in both media and in the real world.

It is Comstock and Strasburger's (1993) position that the effects of television violence are consistent. They believe that, by watching aggression, children learn how to be aggressive in new ways and that they draw conclusions based on the response they believe they will receive. Comstock and Strasburger state "Violence depicted as justified retribution is one of the most strongly reinforcing elements" (p.500). Much of American television movie violence contains this theme. Comstock and Strasburger provide us with four factors that may influence the viewer's perception of violence.

Comstock and Strasburger (1993) believe that these four specific factors affect aggressive or antisocial behaviors:

1. Efficacy: Does the violence result in the achievement of desired social, material, or psychological rewards?
2. Normativeness: Is the violence portrayed as widespread socially acceptable?
3. Pertinence: Does the instigator of the violence resemble the viewers, or are their circumstances similar?
4. Susceptibility: Viewers who are angry, frustrated, or have a reason to seek retribution are more likely to be influenced. (p. 501)

Television affects our children and adolescents and although it is not the only factor contributing to the development of violent behavior, it maybe the easiest to change. Whether or not Comstock and Strasburger (1993) prove their argument is, of course, a matter of debate; that they bring together impressive evidence in support of their conclusions suggest certainty to their argument. On the association between media violence and real-life violence, Comstock and Strasburger cite three theories, which are most applicable to children and adolescents. As in most studies the conclusions were in agreement with those of other researchers of these theories, that is there is a noticeable negative impact consummated through television violence and our adolescent youth, and that self-regard and personal responsibility have been given over to frustration, stress, and aggression.

Comstock and Strasburger (1993) state "Conservative estimate indicates that the average American child or teenager views 1,000 murders, rapes, and aggravated assaults per year on television alone" (495).

Howe (1977) states "Yes, television does provide a worldview that is highly distorted" (p. 45).

Bandura (1971) provides convincing data on how easily children can be influenced by viewing aggression. Bandura and his associates watched nursery school children in a controlled situation that had aggressive behavior. The study was comprised of four groups. All the children had been irritated by the fact that their toys were taken away from them. The control group for the experiment, contained the children who were excluded from witnessing any events involving a life-size toy clown (Bobo). The other three groups had witnessed Bobo being verbally and/or physically abused. The children

were then put in a playroom with the Bobo doll. Three of the four groups demonstrated aggressive behavior toward the doll. The control group, which had not witnessed any violence, showed no aggressive behavior. This experiment supports the theory that after observing violent behavior, children are more likely to imitate the aggressive acts.

"Aggressive habits seem to be learned early in life, and once established, are resistant to change and predictive of serious adult antisocial behavior" (Strasburger, 1995, p.30).

Strasburger (1995) states "From a historical perspective, the media have always represented a potential threat to society" (p.1). Strasburger allows us to visually comprehend the possibilities of the effects that exposure can have on a young person's view of the world. While television, video games, and the Internet have great positive potential for use in learning and development, unfortunately, they also have negative effects, which will be covered in this paper.

In one study, Strasburger (1995) demonstrates the effect of television on the attitudes of our youth. He states "Television can influence viewers' perceptions of what constitutes the real world and normal behavior helps to mold cultural norms, and conveys, important and believable messages about the behaviors it depicts" (p.7).

There are several collective agreements within the broad range of research voiced throughout this paper; first, that there is a majority consensus that media violence has several noticeable effects on viewers, and second, that the effects of television have no boundaries and affect children of all ages, genders, socioeconomic and intelligence levels.

According to Levine (1996), the 1990s have seen the creation of a youth culture which seems to hunger for violence. A large collection of literature has linked exposure to violent television with increased physical aggressiveness among children and violent youth. The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee conducted one such study in 1992. The study, which covers over twenty years of research, has concluded that viewing violent acts through film or television increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior. The report also found that it was the subtler matters, not the amount of television violence watched, that made the difference, such as what the media say about that violence, whether it condones or disapproves, whether the violence is committed by sympathetic characters.

"The report argues that aggression can be almost imperceptible. In effect, television violence could be a form of slow mental disintegration" (Doerken, 1983, p.53). The data, therefore, imply that the underlying cause of violence was not that youth became aggressive by watching violent television, but that the message generated and modeled the behavior that followed. Bandura (1973) researched the forms of children's reactions to different information presented to them. In this study, there were three groups of children. Two groups of children were allowed to see aggressive acts performed. One group viewed a film of an aggressive act; the other viewed the act performed by an adult. The last group did not participate in the viewing of any act. They were all put in a room with toys and were observed. The control group showed no violent behaviors, while the other two groups were observed modeling many of the behaviors watched (p.72-76).

According to Levine (1996) "children are great imitators" (p.18). Their perception of the world seems to devote extensively to the abundance of stimuli around them. She further states "Children are not particularly selective in what they imitate; countless parents have been reminded to pay attention to their language when their three-year old utters 'oh s--t' in frustration" (p. 18).

A common theory is that television desensitizes children's ability to show concern for others. Levine (1996) shows this point with an example of a mother who has taken her two sons to the theater; as they are watching the movie, an actor holds up a bloody eye he has gouged out of another man's head. The mother lets out a scream, but the two children in disgust, and embarrassment state "Be quiet! It's just a movie." Neither son seemed the least bit upset by what he has just seen.

Essentially, media violence legitimizes and contributes to a culture of violence and the acceptance of violence as an effective solution to problems.

"While there may be disagreement among researchers as to the exact contribution of media violence to real-life violence, there is no disagreement that it makes a significant contribution " (Levine, 1996, p.53).

Children no longer learn most of their values from home, school and religious institutions, their communities or indeed their native countries. In fact, the mass media has become the most important moral and ethical educator in most children's lives. Television has become one of the most effective vehicles for communicating messages both positive and negative, and soon we will see the Internet have the same impact on our society (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1985, p. 1-12).

When addressing the issues of the negative effects of television violence Howe (1977) arrives at many of the same conclusions as others. He argues that television is the one most familiar media to our children. He believes that, because of its availability, and the enormous amount of time children spend viewing it, we should expect changes in how they perceive their soundings. These media of communication have been believed to produce negative social and psychological effects on its audience, particularly social relations, and a particular form of consciousness or way of thinking, that are quite independent of the content being transmitted. In fact, Howe argues that "Television does distort reality, and many children do perceive what they see on television as being closer to real life than it really is" (Howe, 1997, p.41).

Howe (1977) suggests that not viewing the world perception of a child as a viable component of socialization would be a mistake. Because television has the ability to form attitudes and guide actions of its viewers, the only conclusion we should come to is that television influences, sometimes harmfully by the content and manner it is used (p.45). Howe (1977) states earlier in his book that "anything new that captures the imagination of children and adolescents and distracts them from obeying their elders certainly qualifies."

The television consumption of our youth and adolescents provides credibility to the above statement. Newton (1995) states "Today, in most American homes, children aged two to eleven watch television for twenty-two hours a week. Teenagers watch about the same: twenty-three hours a week" (p.32).

Howe (1997) provides a very good parallel to his belief in the power of television and its impact on our youth. He states "Every generation is only twenty years

from barbarism. Twenty years is all we have to accomplish the task of civilizing the infants who are born into our midst each year" (p.50).

Howe (1977) believes the world children live in presents very practical modes of learning violence especially when considering the impact television has on how they view the world. He believes that children identify with television heroes, and that violence depicted enlarges their environment. He states "It exerts its influence at a time of life when the child's knowledge of the rules and conventions that govern social actions and moral behavior is incomplete and immature" (p.33).

Newton (1995) states "Like all media, television is a teacher. But television is a more powerful teacher than most, and its principal pupils are the very young children" (p.32).

Howe (1977) states "that most children are able to learn from the many fundamental social patterns that are structured in their lives." He gives the examples of trial and error, attachment to adults, observing and imitating, oral instruction and graphic and pictorial representation. However, man has developed many methods which contribute to expanding the growth of learning. One such method is the introduction of the book that expands the different situations in the environment from which children can learn. The development of television has provided an even more novel process for change, one that Howe (1977) believes "assaults" the visual and auditory senses simultaneously (p.32-50). Howe (1977) sees several outcomes to just watching television:

1. It influences viewers behavior
2. It increase viewers tolerance of violence in others

3. It influence use of violence
4. It alters sensitivity to violence

Howe (1977) states "If a child comes to believe that acting violently is the normal way of dealing with a range of problems, and at the same time learns how to act violently from watching violent situations on television, he will be more likely to acquire violent habits than an individual whose exposure to violence is comparatively limited" (p. 75).

This media message provides the socialization patterns from which an individual forms behaviors and attitudes. In other words, we see media content become the backdrop of the communication process. Under this assumption then, media has become a learning mechanism and a carrier of messages, whose impact of and contribution in teaching our children negative behaviors should be obvious (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1985, p.1-12).

Children see an alarming amount of violent actions on television. What is disturbing about this is that there is the possibility that children will accept the information that is viewed on television as a legitimate picture of the world, when it is not. (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1985, p.1-12)

Howe (1977) states "If television were simply to mirror the realities of life, a stated concern about the medium's influence would simply amount to an expression of concern about the quality of life in general" (p.32). "

However, if it falsifies reality and shows children a distorted view of the world, the influence of television may be more pernicious. Yet, however numerous the hours that a child spends watching television, his own actions and attitudes are

unlikely to be strongly affected unless he thinks that television does portray life as it really is" (Howe, p.32).

Arnold (1969) states "violence serves only to capture and hold audiences, to whet and habitualize their appetites for more of the same...then it can and does undermine children's formation of proper values judgments and conscience" (p.26-27).

Bogart (1995) states "Media audiences are shaped by the way time is spent at different social levels and in different periods of life" (p.22). Since 1955, reports, studies and congressional testimonies by experts in the field have concluded that the mass media are significant contributors to the aggressive behavior and aggression related attitudes of many children, adolescents and adults (American Psychological Association 1995; National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Surgeon General, 1972).

Levine (1996,) states "From 1975 to 1992, there was a 64 percent increase in the number of ten-to-fourteen-year-olds who were murdered and a 50 percent increase in the number of fifteen-to-twenty-four-year-olds" (p.52). In a report by the Bureau of Justice Statistics United States Department of Justice between 1985 to 1994, the rate of murder committed by teens, ages 14-17, increased 172 percent. In terms of arrest rates per 100,000 population, 14-17 year-olds have now surpassed young adults, ages 18-24.

These data show that rates of juvenile homicide and other violent offenses by youth are rising and can be expected to increase in the years ahead. This infection of violence is occurring worldwide, and becoming an alarming pattern of violence for our youth. Children become more aggressive and grow up more likely to become involved in violence if they witness violent acts.

These young people appear, then, to be developing patterns of aggressive, antisocial behavior. While this review can not predict where this behavior will lead, it is certainly cause for alarm. An August 10, 1998 the article in Christianity Today shows that the aggravated assault and murder rate in America has gone from around 60 per 100,000 in 1957 to over 440 per 100,000 by the middle of this decade" (Grossman 1998, p.31).

"In a real, a very real sense, whether we appreciate the full extent of the medium's influence, we must recognize that we are engaged in a special form of learning warfare and that our youngsters have a split vision of life" (Doerken, 1983, p.27). They have had two teaching curriculums, not just one. They possess two view of experience: one provided from their day-to-day lives and one provided to them by TV (Doerken, 1983, p.27).

Since violence is everywhere, it is an impossibility to avoid it. Refusal to address the issue will not solve it. In this review, this author has tried to provide evidence on how children and adolescents react to media violence. This author has also tried to provide data on how violent programs on television lead to aggressive behavior by children and teenagers who watch those programs. In a 1982 report by the National Institute of Mental Health, a report which substantiated a study done earlier by the Surgeon General. The study reiterated the message that violent programs on television lead to aggressive behavior. Because of these and other research findings, the American Psychological Association passed a resolution in February, 1985 informing broadcasters and the public of the potential dangers that viewing violence on television can have for children. The current studies show us, for example, that viewing television violence has three major

effects on children and teenagers who view violence on television. Children may become less sensitive to the pain and suffering of others, be more fearful of the world around them, and are more likely to behave in aggressive or harmful ways toward others. The literature utilized in this research is very compelling and clear.

Conclusion

Despite the evidence collected proving the effects of violence, there are still those who oppose the idea that can media influence aggressive behaviors. Entertainment executives and scientists persist on denying the link between the viewing TV violence and children's aggressive behavior. Many believe that the evidence provided has not significantly proven that TV violence is harmful. Many scientists however believe that studies show that there is a link between TV violence and aggression.

Kopel (1995) published a report that substantiates this view. The report, entitled The Impact of the Mass Media Revolution, confirms that the harmful effects of TV violence do exist. Television violence does contribute to aggressive behavior in children and adolescents.

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