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“Media violence is made to attract and entertain people”: Responses to Media Literacy Lessons on the Effects of and Institutional Motives Behind Media Violence

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Abstract

This study investigated the following research question: How do sixth-graders respond to a media literacy lesson that was designed to, among other goals, introduce the concept of the presence of commercial interest in media production, particularly regarding the prevalence of media violence? Forty-seven responses were analyzed thematically using constant comparison. Students' responses illustrate their critical thinking and understanding about producers' intent in including violence in media, although recognizing the commercial interest behind media violence still seems to be a challenge. Findings also suggest the task of striking a balance between instilling critical thinking skills and acknowledging children's personal media experiences.

Keywords: *media institutions, children and media, media violence, critical thinking*

In the United States, a long-standing concern about media violence has contributed to the rise of media literacy as an integrated part of school curricula, as well as a scholarly research area (Huesmann et al. 1983; Singer & Singer 1998; Webb et al. 2010). Such concern is duly grounded in an ever-growing body of theoretical and empirical work demonstrating potential negative implications of exposure to media violence. Building on seminal theoretical work (Bandura 1977; Berkowitz 1984; Gunter 1985), recent studies have suggested that portrayals of physical, verbal, and relational aggression can activate aggressive cognitions (Coyne et al. 2012), desensitize viewers to mediated or real-world violence (Madan, Mrug & Wright 2014), and lead to the modeling of aggressive behaviors (Martins & Wilson 2012).

Scholarly attention to media influence is not surprising given the prominence of the media effects tradition among communication scholars and developmental psychologists in the U.S., which has

made it a

major trajectory within the media literacy movement (Kubey 1998; Potter 2010). Nevertheless, existing media literacy education (MLE) initiatives on media violence have received criticism for being too “text-centered” in analyzing media content and overlooking the role of media institutions in creating media messages (Lewis & Jhally 1998). The ultimate goal of MLE, therefore, should take into account the social, political, and economic power that contributes to media production, in order to go beyond creating informed consumers toward creating knowledgeable and participatory citizens (Lewis & Jhally 1998).

Tapping into the economic and institutional aspects of media, this paper will answer the research question: How do sixth graders respond to a media literacy lesson designed to, among other goals, introduce the concept of the commercial interest that exists in mainstream U.S. media production, particularly regarding the prevalence of media

violence? Addressing the role of media institutions in media production, this study also attempted to bridge the multiple traditions—media effects, cultural studies, and political economy—that co-occur in current U.S.-based MLE curricula and research. Additionally, this curriculum introduced students to open-ended critical thinking skills and encouraged them to apply those skills in analyzing violent media content.

Literature Review

Concepts of Production in Media Literacy

In media literacy literature, the term *production* refers to three interrelated concepts. First, production is used to describe media content creation, where students obtain hands-on experience making media messages through the promotion of technical knowledge and skills, such as in the creation of public service announcements or videos (Banerjee & Greene 2007; Doolittle 1980). Second, the term is used to describe the idea of media content as a product created by media institutions (Buckingham 2003; Lewis & Jhally 1998; Masterman 1985). Third, production is seen as part of youth engagement in media prosumer activities, which involve creating and sharing media content using ICT platforms (Jenkins et al. 2006; Ito & Lange, 2010; Lenhart et al. 2007)

Production as technical knowledge and skills. While most effects-oriented media literacy interventions pertaining to violence have focused primarily on the *content and reception* of media messages, some have incorporated media production, through an emphasis on production techniques/conventions (e.g., special effects) (Sprafkin, Watkins, & Gadow 1990), a project in which participants produce content (Doolittle 1980; Huesmann et al. 1983), or both (Rosenkoetter et al. 2004).

Interventions involving media production lessons and/or activities have observed mixed levels of success in terms of knowledge gain, attitude change, and aggression reduction. Prior studies found that introducing students to technical aspects of the creation of television violence or providing them with hands-on production experience did not

significantly reduce their approval of violent content, feelings of aggression and arousal while watching it, or the amount of time spent watching television (Doolittle 1980; Sprafkin et al. 1990). However, other studies suggested that incorporating production information and/or activities can be effective in increasing knowledge about television conventions, changing attitudes about the potentially harmful nature of television violence, as well as in lowering peer-rated aggressiveness—but only when the undesirability of television violence is made explicit in the curriculum (Huesmann et al. 1983; Rosenkötter et al. 2004; Sprafkin et al. 1990).

Production as understanding about media institutions. Some scholars have argued that equally important to being critical toward media content is being aware of media messages as part of larger media institutions that have their own values and interests (Buckingham 1998, 2003; Kellner & Share 2005; Martens 2010; Rosenbaum, Beentjes & König 2008). In order to cultivate awareness of how media messages carry the interests and values of media producers, lessons in an MLE initiative should consistently tie back to a discussion surrounding the institutional context of media production (Lewis & Jhally 1998; Masterman 1985). From this perspective, upon completing an MLE curriculum, students should be able to articulate, for example, who does and does not have a voice in media, the possible reasons why media producers choose to convey certain messages, and why those messages are communicated in a particular way (Masterman 1985; Sholle & Denski 1994). Such understanding can be more important than the detailed knowledge about production techniques (Masterman 1985; 1997). Technical knowledge, without critical awareness about the institutional nature of media production, would make media literacy fall into a “technicist trap”, leading to cultural reproduction of the status quo (Masterman 1985, 26).

The issue of the commercial interest of media producers is pertinent to the context of the U.S. media landscape, where ratings and revenue are the parameters of the success of media programs (Kellner & Share 2005; Lewis & Jhally 1998; Martens 2010). Addressing the role of MLE in the U.S. media ecology, Lewis and Jhally (1998) posited that MLE should help students denaturalize, critique,

and challenge the commercial nature of U.S. media that has been taken for granted.

Notably, discussion about the institutional aspect of media production is relatively untapped within U.S.-based media literacy research. To date, only a few studies have incorporated institution-related knowledge in their MLE curriculum. For example, Yosso (2002) reported the effectiveness of MLE in motivating students to challenge negative stereotypes of Chicana/o characters in media; however, students struggled on the idea of stereotypic portrayals in relation to the commercial imperatives of media. Somewhat differently, an experimental study by Duran et al. (2008) found that MLE increased college students' awareness about media structures – including an understanding of the issue of ownership and control, alternative media, media activism, and media reform. Additionally, MLE also enhanced students' knowledge about media influence and critical reading of media texts.

Production as youth digital participatory culture. The emergence of information communication technologies (ICTs) as a new form of media has enabled young media users not only to consume, but also produce media content (Jenkins et al. 2006; Lenhart 2007; Livingstone 2004). The presence of social media such as MySpace, Facebook, and YouTube as digital publication avenues provides opportunities for youth to share their works. Although some children and teens only share their media production within their circles of family and friends, many pursue digital media production as a serious hobby or even an aspirational career trajectory (Ito & Lange 2010). Besides facilitating youth to explore their technical skills, MLE initiatives that allow youth to immerse in media prosumer activities can also increase awareness of social issues and civic engagement among young people (Lim & Nekmat 2008).

The use of digital media among youth also raises the question of the role of producers in shaping users' media experience. With the possibility of producing media content as well as sharing it with a wider audience, the role of MLE in cultivating an understanding about producers' ethical and social responsibility becomes more significant (Jenkins et al. 2006). Jenkins and colleagues argue that while professional media producers, such as

journalists, have their own watchdogs as part of their professional associations or organizations, the norms in the virtual world are more in flux. Online communities tend to rely on self-disclosure and self-report to police their members. In other words, prosumers often must depend on their own judgment call on what and what not to produce or share in order to engage in safe online activities and avoid involvement in antisocial online behaviors. Therefore, MLE should aim to develop reflexivity among youth regarding their choices and the implications of those choices in the context of their participation in the digital world.

Critical Thinking in Media Literacy

Autonomy in critical thinking. Masterman (1985) argued that MLE should go beyond raising critical awareness and understanding, and focus on building *critical autonomy* (25). The acquisition of this skill to use media critically even in the absence of teachers or adults is crucial for students in order to effectively navigate the various media environments they encounter. The notion of critical autonomy necessitates teachers' acknowledgment of students' existing media experiences and the pleasure they obtain from them as opposed to imposing teachers' points of view. Dismissing students' perspectives about media would be counterproductive because it could generate inauthentic responses from the students or ignite resistance against the lessons (Buckingham 2003; Masterman 1985). Yet, walking a fine line between cultivating a critical perspective and preventing students from merely reproducing teachers' versions of media readings can be challenging. Even when they are told that there are no right or wrong answers, students generally are socialized to produce answers that please their teachers (Buckingham 2003).

Critical thinking in existing U.S.-based MLE curricula. Distinct from interventions aimed at demonstrating measurable change in attitudes about TV violence and/or a decrease in aggressive behavior, a few past studies of media violence media literacy have diverged from a singular media-effects focus by incorporating broader media literacy goals, including improving children's critical thinking abilities (Arke & Primack 2009; Scharrer 2005,

2006; Webb et al. 2010). Although still open to the criticism of taking a protectionist stance or hierarchical approach (Buckingham 1998), these curricula were also designed to empower students with independent analytical and critical thinking abilities in evaluating media content and audience responses (Masterman 1985).

Critical thinking-centered curricula have tended to emphasize the social context and ethical implications of media production (Scharrer 2005, 2006). For instance, Scharrer's (2006) sixth-grade curriculum, designed to develop comprehension, critical thinking, and critical attitudes toward media violence and the ethical issues involved, included lessons on media regulations and the social responsibility of media producers. Quantitative and qualitative analyses of pre-program and post-program assessments suggested that participants increased their ability to recognize high-risk violent media content, their understanding of its ethical implications and potential consequences, as well as their awareness of the unrealistic nature of violent media portrayals.

In their curriculum, Webb and colleagues (2010) included a lesson on the responsibility of media producers, in addition to lessons on reality vs. fantasy, media effects, and alternative problem solving strategies. Comparing students' pretest and posttest scores, Webb et al. found that the intervention advanced students' knowledge, strengthened their beliefs about the unrealistic nature of media violence, and prompted them to think more critically about media content and aggression in their own lives.

Method

Sampling and Curriculum

The lesson of focus in this paper was the second lesson of a five-session media literacy program. The curriculum was developed and facilitated by graduate-level and upper-level undergraduate students advised by their Communication professor at a large public university in a rural Northeast town. The convenience sample of program participants, chosen based on an existing relationship between the faculty advisor and a local

elementary school, included three sixth-grade classes (65 students). Based on prior media literacy research (Scharrer 2005, 2006; Webb et al. 2010), the sixth graders (ages 11-12) were considered to be at an appropriate age for a critical thinking-centered curriculum. Moreover, around the age of 11, children have developed skepticism, and may start to think about the ideological implications of media messages (Buckingham 2003). For the purpose of building rapport with participants, a unique facilitation team, consisting of a mix of graduate and undergraduate students, was assigned to work consistently with each of the three sixth-grade classes. The researchers obtained permission from the teachers and principal at the school, who circulated a consent form (approved by the Departmental Human Subjects Review committee) to parents/guardians of potential participants. Each lesson consisted of three major elements: a PowerPoint presentation including pictures and clips to introduce concepts and prompt discussion, handouts to reinforce the lesson, and homework assignments to encourage independent application of the content. The homework, completed within participants' journals, served as data for the present study.

The overall objectives of the program included increasing participants' awareness of media violence concepts (e.g., media effects, stereotypes in aggressive depictions, and ethical implications of violent content) and encouraging critical thinking about aggressive and stereotypical media portrayals and the economic, social, and political forces that produce them. The curriculum included four content-based sessions, 60 minutes each, covering four topics: media ratings/regulation and critical thinking, media violence (the focus of the current paper), gender representations in media violence, and bullying in the media (see Table 1 for lesson descriptions). During a fifth session, the sixth graders presented public service announcement posters related to the curriculum that they had created in small groups as a hands-on media production activity, an element of media literacy that prior research has shown to be effective in stimulating student engagement and positive response (Banerjee & Greene 2007). For purposes of length, only the media violence session is discussed

in this paper.

All lessons were designed to promote student participation. For example, as prior studies have demonstrated that cognitive activities – tasks that

utilize mental reasoning and/or memory processes – function to reinforce lesson content and prevent the boomerang effect associated with exposure to violent

Table 1
Program Curriculum

Lesson	Topics
Media Ratings & Critical Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Television ratings system · Film ratings system · Video games ratings system · Definition of critical thinking · Critical thinking about violent content
Media Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Types of aggression (physical, verbal, relational) · Negative effects of violent media (e.g. learned aggression, desensitization, “mean world syndrome”) · “High-risk factors” from National Television Violence Study (NTVS) that increase chances of negative media effects (Smith et al. 1998) · “Third-person effect”
Gender and the Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Definition of stereotypes · Gender-related stereotypes (and violent media) · Effects of stereotyping in the media · Gender distribution among employees in the media industry
Bullying in the Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Types of bullying (physical, verbal, relational, and cyber) · Bullying and stereotypes · Cyber bullying (pervasiveness and severity)
Poster Presentations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Presentations of PSAs from sixth-graders on each major lesson topic · Participant feedback

media content (Byrne 2009; Huesmann et al. 1983; Scharrer 2005, 2006), the screening of violent media clips was always accompanied by a cognitive task, such as counting violent acts in a clip, or analyzing the clip for the ways in which violence was depicted.

Media Violence Lesson

Four subtopics were included within the media violence lesson: types of aggression, negative effects of media violence, third-person effect, and media production decisions and contexts. The lesson began with the screening of a clip from the cartoon, *Tom and Jerry*, followed by an activity in which students counted the acts of violence in the

clip. This led to a discussion of the definition of media violence (What should count? What should not? Why?) and the various types of harm that might be portrayed in the media (physical, verbal, relational) as well as to an acknowledgment of the presence of violence — sometimes in rather large amounts — in media content targeted toward children. Then, the facilitators introduced the high-risk factors of violent media portrayals adapted from the National Television Violence Study (NTVS) (Smith et al. 1998), which included (a) violence without consequences, (b) rewarded violence, (c) justified violence, (d) violence done by “good guys,” and (e) realistic (non-fantasy) violence, with an overall explanation that just as media are neither all

bad nor all good, even depictions of media violence can differ in terms of how problematic they may be, and this list of concepts provides useful dimensions by which to weigh the implications of the depiction. Next, the students participated in an activity in which they identified the presence or absence of these high-risk factors in a clip from *Shrek*.

Following the activity, the facilitators outlined some of the potential negative effects of violence portrayed in high-risk ways: (a) learned aggression (Bandura 1977), (b) desensitization (Gunter 1985), and (c) mean world syndrome (Morgan, Shanahan & Signorielli 2009). Then, they asked the students whom (i.e. what type of media consumer) they thought was likely to be influenced in these negative ways. Their responses led into a discussion of both the targeting of media content toward particular audiences and the concept of the third-person effect, or the hypothesis that media users believe that others are more negatively affected by media content than themselves (Davison 1983). This topic seemed especially relevant to highlight to the participants, who were at the cusp of adolescence, as the *invincibility principle*, or the notion that adolescents tend to consider themselves impervious to harm (Gumbiner 2003; Silverberg & Gondoli 1996) this principle has been argued to magnify the third-person effect (Scharrer & Leone 2006, 2008). Demonstrating the logical fallacy of the third-person perception was expected to open up the possibility that the students would view themselves, rather than just other people, as potentially influenced.

The final minutes of the lesson circled back to the *Tom and Jerry* and *Shrek* examples to initiate a discussion about the commercial aspects of media production decisions. Having reviewed the negative effects of media violence and the high-risk factors that increase the likelihood of these effects, facilitators highlighted the fact that children's cartoons and other material targeted toward young audiences by media producers frequently show violence in high-risk ways. Next, in an effort to promote independent thinking, they asked students to respond to this trend and discuss possible explanations for it. In the case that participants did not organically make a connection to the commercial interests of institutions, facilitators guided them to

this conclusion. For example, if a student proposed that cartoon creators included violence because it is "entertaining," facilitators asked, "Why would production companies want to make shows entertaining?" in order to lead participants to consider the profit motive of media institutions.

Following the lesson, the participants were given the following two-part homework assignment, designed to provide them with the opportunity to apply the same critical reasoning to their personal media experience:

"When you watch TV, watch a movie, or play a video game this week that contains violence, please answer these questions:

1. Why did the creator of that show, movie, or game decide to put violence in it?
2. Do you think that this is generally a good thing, a bad thing, or neither?"

Forty-seven students who participated in the program completed this homework assignment within their journals. The data for the current study consists of these responses, which were assessed in terms of whether the sixth graders demonstrated an understanding of key concepts (particularly the economic motivations of media producers and the complexity of the potential implications of exposure to media violence that stem in part from the ways in which that violence is portrayed), as well as the ability to apply these concepts in the context of their personal media viewing experiences.

The analysis of the journal entries was approached through inductive, textual analysis in order to identify themes that recurred across and within the students' entries. As homework assignments were open coded (by phrase/sentence), tentative themes and categories were formed. Then, the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss 2009) was used to compare emerging themes to those identified within additional responses. Once emerging categories were confirmed by additional example, representative exemplars were selected to illustrate the trends. These exemplars (identified using pseudonyms) and frequencies of the number of participants who wrote similarly categorized

responses are reported in the following results. Phrases or sentences from an individual's assignment could fall into multiple categories.

Results

Why Media Creators Include Violence

Among 47 journal entries, only 1 student incorporated explicit speculation about profit-seeking motive in his explanation of why violence was present in the media he used. Discussing the video game *Modern Warfare*, Tim wrote, "I think that [by including violence]... the creator was hoping... that people would like the game so much that they would tell their friends to buy it and the creator would make lots of money."

Responding to the first question of why a media creator may have chosen to put violence in media content, the students offered a range of suggestions that did not mention profit motives or commercial considerations directly. Their responses included explanations related both to the viewer (e.g., the violence was funny) and the media content (e.g., the violence was appropriate for the genre). Although the students varied in their reasoning, three major themes emerged from the data: violence is entertaining, violence is fitting, and violence is realistic.

Violence is entertaining. The most frequent explanation for media producers' inclusion of violent content offered by the participants (appearing in 27 of 47 responses) was that the violence makes content entertaining. Rachel, for instance, wrote, "I watched *The Simpsons*. The creator put violence in it to make it humerus (sic), intertaining (sic), and to show different people's personalities." Chris wrote about *The Incredibles*, "If their (sic) was no violence the movie would be dry and boring." Similarly, Steve said about *The World's Greatest Fighter Planes*, "The creator decided to put violence in it because it is a history documentary and it would be very boring if there was no violence." Students also described violence as exciting, funny, attractive, interesting, or dramatic in illustrating how it can increase entertainment value. For example, Adeline wrote, "I watched *Pirates of the Carribbean* (sic). It was pretty violent, and I think the creator put

violence in to make it more exciting. They were hoping for an adventurous, pirate-y effect." Speaking more generally, Amy explained, "Media violence is made to attract and entertain people" and thus inspired the title of this paper.

Among the 27 responses proposing that violence makes media entertaining, one dominant sub-theme emerged: "violence is funny," with 11 journal entries mentioning how violence can have a comedic effect. Doug, for instance, wrote, "I think the creator of the show did it... to make it funny. The effect was to make people laugh and joke around..." Similarly, Carrie suggested that a movie creator "put violence into the film to have slapstick humor, or in general to humor the audience."

Violence is fitting. A second major theme that emerged from the data (appearing in 17 of 47 responses) was the notion that "violence is fitting" because it is appropriate for the plot, characters, or genre. For instance, Gaby wrote, "In *Groundhog Day* the writer had Phil kill himself multiple times to show the theme of the day continuously reaccering (sic)," whereas Chris wrote, "The reason the creator of [*The Incredibles*] put violence in is that the movie is about superheroes. Superheroes fight the villans (sic)." Kathy discussed the reasoning behind the violence in *CSI Miami*, saying, "The creator... put violence in it because it is a crime scene investigation show so they kind of need to put violence in there to understand how the person got killed."

Violence is realistic. A third trend across participants' responses (appearing in 8 of 47 journal entries) was "violence is realistic," or the idea that media creators include violence because violence happens in the real world. Several students applied this reasoning to reality shows, explaining that media creators included violence because it actually happened. For example, Julie, discussing *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, suggested, "The creator put violence in the show because it is reality and siblings fight so he showed that." Similarly, Joanne wrote, "I watched *Jersey Shore*. I think the creator put violence cause (sic) its (sic) reality and they wanted more people to watch cause (sic) there is more action and things happening instead of everyone getting along."

Evaluating Media Violence

Defending and Downplaying. In resonance with their responses on why they thought media creators include violence, students tended to give favorable evaluations of media violence. Responding to the question of whether the media violence they observed was a good or bad thing, 16 of 47 students said that violence was actually a good thing and only 3 students evaluated violent acts in media negatively. The remaining 22 students expressed ambivalent opinions towards the media violence they saw. Students who perceived media violence in a positive light or took an ambivalent position praised the aggressive words or behaviors that they saw in media for their efficacy in enhancing the media experience. Compatibility with genres became a reason for embracing media violence, which consistently appeared in students' answers. For these students, movies, television shows, or video games make more sense and can be more enjoyable when violence is added in the storyline. Incorporating violence in a mystery drama, for example, is just natural, or even expected, because it creates a thrill for the viewers. Discussing the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Erin argued, "its (sic) ok to put violence in it if it makes the show more interesting and creates suspense." For Abigail, violence in *NCIS* is a good thing, and it should indeed be included in the series, because "the show wouldn't make sense without it. After all it's a crime scene investigation show."

Besides asserting the relevance of violence to particular media content, downplaying the violent acts they viewed also became a basis to defend media violence (appearing in 9 of 47 responses). For instance, Sonia suggested, "The violence was minimal and benign only serving to enhance it." Eric, who discussed the violence in the *Wizards 101* video game, said, "I think it's neither good nor bad because it's just a cartoon video game with a tiny amount of comical violence, which I only play on the weekends." Notably, in addition to minimizing the violence, Eric also minimized his exposure to it.

Although the first question of the homework assignment was designed to prompt the students to think critically about the profit motive behind production, it instead seemed to encourage them to

generate legitimate and logical reasons why media creators include violence. Several participants referred back to their responses to the first question in order to defend the violence they watched and suggest that it was not a bad thing. For example, Adeline wrote about *Pirates of the Caribbean*, "I think using violence for a pirate effect is okay, because pirates *are* violent." Another theme of arguments that served to both minimize violence and defend its presence in media content was that violence is both intended to be funny and interpreted as funny by the audience. Expressing her opinion about media violence in general, Lucy explained that violence is "meant to be funny not harmful." Additionally, Sean, referring to *The Simpsons*, wrote, "...most people who watch don't take [the violence] seriously."

Third-person perception. Also within responses to the question of whether media violence is generally a good or bad thing, the third-person perception emerged as a pattern that framed the responses of 6 students. These students agreed that media violence might have a negative influence. However, claiming their own invincibility, they asserted that the effects that violent media might generate would be harmful for other children, but not themselves. Age was the most common reason for them to justify their evaluation of media violence. Five out of the six students whose answers reflected the presence of third-person perception considered themselves old enough not to be affected by media violence, which otherwise would pose undesirable effects on younger children. For example, referring to *NCIS*, Stacey wrote, "Well if little kids watch it, then its (sic) a bad thing but I do not think it's bad for our age." Cindy suggested, "Some people might take it (*Tom and Jerry*) seriously but some older people like me might not take it the negative (sic) way and take it as funny." Only one student, Oscar, did not connect susceptibility to age, but instead to *generation or cohort*. He wrote: "I don't think that the violence was a good thing because back when these [*The Three Stooges*] were made a lot of kids saw them and they might try and do things like them."

In summary, students' thinking surrounding media violence appeared to be rather far removed from a direct and explicit acknowledgment of the

profit-generating motive of media producers. In addition, although a plurality of students (22 of 47) appeared to think critically about both the possible good *and* bad effects of media violence, a substantial number of additional students (16) expressed their explicit *approval* of media violence. The data from the students' journals provide insights into the ways in which they largely defended and protected the pleasures of media violence in their own lives in response to the curriculum.

Discussion

The current study attempted to examine a hybrid curriculum that was based on the media effects paradigm that also encouraged students to think of the profit motives of media industries that drive the creation and circulation of risky content. It also attempted a decidedly non-didactic approach, suggesting nuances in media effects of violence and creating room for the appreciation of media in individuals' lives. Perhaps most critically, the present MLE curriculum was organized around students' individual responses to open-ended questions and their own independent analyses.

Such an approach yielded data that might be considered evidence of both successes and failures in terms of whether autonomous critical thinking was achieved. First, although only one student of 47 explicitly mentioned the profit motives of media companies in his homework, many others responded that violence is present in media content because of the audience and what is presumed to appeal to them. No explicit mention was made of institutions, content creators, producers, distributors, etc. or of economic incentives, *per se*. Yet, the fact that so many of the 6th graders mentioned producers' needs to appeal to an audience—to target them, to capture their attention, to make them laugh, and to entertain them—does suggest a knowledge of the most fundamental element of the media production process: the appeal and targeting of audiences. Therefore, although this approach did not necessarily result in the sort of active challenging of the power of media institutions that Lewis and Jhally (1998) or Masterman (1985) call for, the findings reflect some understanding from these young people's responses of *why* media content is produced.

The finding that only three students expressly viewed media violence negatively could easily be considered a drawback to the efficacy of the curriculum's design. Yet, when one considers the nature of critical thinking as an open-ended process of inquiry in which multiple points of view are considered, complexity is embraced, and shades of gray are encouraged rather than thinking in black and white terms (Aufderheide 1997; Ediger 2001; Singer & Singer 1998), then perhaps the 22 students—a plurality of the 41 who responded directly to this question—that expressed ambivalent views of media violence can be considered successes. A media literate view of media violence might well acknowledge the pleasure many people receive from such texts as well as their potential for negative influence on audiences. Indeed, media effects researchers themselves have long studied the appeal of media violence (Hoffner & Levine 2005) alongside its potentially detrimental effects and the NTVS high risk factors implicitly acknowledge that how violence is presented is just as, if not more, important as whether it is present at all (Smith et al. 1998).

Another limitation of the curriculum that needs to be acknowledged is the absence of specific discussion of the role of the genre of the media content that presents media violence. The findings, while illustrating the prevalence of violence across many different media forms, ranging from cartoon series like *Tom and Jerry* to video games such as *Modern Warfare*, also suggested that the functional aspect of media violence we found in the ways the young people in our sample made sense of the media violence with which they interact may be inseparable from the genre of a book, television show, or video game. For example, our participants suggested physical violence is included in cartoon films merely to invoke audiences' laughter. Somewhat to the contrary, their comments suggest violence is inevitable in a crime drama in order to keep the cohesion of the storyline. Thus, the violence in the cartoon and in the crime drama function differently, by virtue of their genre. Future MLE studies should take into account the role and constraint of genre in creating the curriculum and lesson plans.

A discussion of the third-person effect (Davison 1983) was included in the curriculum in an

effort to show students that while the tendency is to deny the possibility that media negatively influence ourselves, such a perception is so widely shared that it cannot logically be the reality for all. The hope was that knowing about this perceptual tendency might inspire some self-awareness about the ways media might influence us *all*, including the self. Yet, the data show some of the students did, indeed, express the view that they were less susceptible to media effects of violence than others were, particularly compared to younger others. Such a pattern is not entirely surprising given the prior studies that have found third-person perceptions within this age group, particularly in their views of susceptibility to effects of violent media (Chapin 2002; Scharrer & Leone 2006, 2008). Future research should further consider the ways in which the concept of the third person effect can be more successfully utilized in MLE. Does simply knowing the third-person perception persists seem like another means of protecting one's own pleasure received from some media violence texts?

This study joins a small number of others that explore the ways in which young people find ways to preserve their own pleasures of media consumption. In assessing college students' responses to an MLE unit on the Disney film *The Little Mermaid*, Sun and Scharrer (2004), for example, found that students tended to downplay potentially negative readings of the text and defend their own connections to the text by pointing to the inevitability of the narrative (e.g., that's just how the story goes) and to its ability to entertain. As the current study called for students to apply the lesson plan concepts to media texts they sought out themselves, rather than those chosen by the teacher, attachments to the media content were likely to be protected in their responses.

The current study also sheds light on the ways in which the concept and practice of production might take form and take on importance in MLE curricula. From considering the political, economic, and other forces that shape the creation and circulation of media texts (Lewis & Jhally 1998; Masterman 1985; Sholle & Denski 1994), to the opportunities for young people to create media themselves in the context of an MLE curriculum on media violence (Doolittle 1980; Huesmann et al. 1983; Rosenkoetter et al. 2004; Sprafkin et al. 1990),

or in the everyday context of "prodience/prosuming" on social networking sites, YouTube, and other Internet channels (Jenkins et al. 2006; Lenhart 2007; Livingstone 2004), the concept of production is a rich aspect of media literacy in the contemporary media environment. Our data, we hope, provides a small step in determining the ways in which a small group of young MLE participants considered the question of *why* media content takes a particular shape, why it includes violence and how that violence might appeal to and entertain an audience. Viewing the construction of media content critically is likely to be intertwined with a critical understanding of one's role in constructing such content oneself (Lim & Nekmat 2008). Additionally, future studies, for example using focus group discussions as a data collection method, are needed to see the interplay between students' personal media reading and the influence of their peers in expressing their critical awareness of the social responsibility involved in media production.

MLE scholar Renee Hobbs (2004) points to the media literacy educator as, variously, "sage on the stage" or "guide on the side" (44). The MLE unit discussed in this paper took a guide on the side stance—asking probing questions of the students, guiding them toward particular considerations, but not telling them to adopt our own judgments as the "sage" may do. Such an approach has advantages in terms of creating authentic, independent responses from the students. However, this approach also has disadvantages, including replicating mainstream, fairly "easy" interpretations of media texts (e.g., violence is entertaining) that may well have been in place regardless of participation in an MLE curriculum. It must be concluded, therefore, that particularly with a topic such as media violence for which there has been established a conclusive link between violent media use and negative outcomes such as aggression, desensitization, and the mean world syndrome, perhaps the guide must be a bit more direct in encouraging students to *challenge* the dominant view of media violence as purely entertaining while still embracing the complexities of audience members' relationships with texts.

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