



MASS MEDIA VIOLENCE ...

1. The Theories

There is a surfeit of theories linking mass media violence to aggressive or criminal behaviour. Some suggest that the observation of violence causes the aggression, some that the aggression causes the observation and some that something else (perhaps personality) causes both. Some theories predict a positive, some a negative relationship. There is nothing to stop all of them being true for some people in some situations at some time.

(a) Social Learning Theory

I watch the new American film 'Falling Down' in which a very ordinary citizen of Los Angeles is irritated by a Korean store owner who will not give him change for a telephone call. After he has knifed the storekeeper he riddles with bullets a fast-food restaurant that stopped serving breakfast three minutes before he arrives and goes on to blast with a bazooka a road repair crew that is, he thinks, unnecessarily causing congestion. I acquire a knife, machine gun and bazooka and set out in search of a Korean-American store owner...

(b) Disinhibiting Theory

After seeing a series of films like Die Hard 2 (body count 264) or Rambo III (body count 106) I conclude that murder is no big deal: and see no reason not to go ahead with the murder I had already planned in my imagination.

(c) Arousal Theory

Any stimulus that rouses me, including a funny Charlie Chaplin film will lead to more aggressive behaviour than a neutral film, and the arousal generated by a violent film makes me more likely to engage in any action both good and bad.

(d) Mood Theory

Watching a series of simulated bank robberies in *Crimewatch UK* induces a malevolent mood. I feel like burgling my neighbour's house.

(e) Catharsis Theory

I intend to spend the evening breaking into parked cars and stealing their radios; but find that being able to watch 'The Bill' for a third time in a week is enough to get these felonious tendencies out of my system. I go to bed with a mug of Ovaltine instead.

(f) Time pre-emption Theory

Potentially a serial killer, I spend so much time glued to the box watching serial killings that I have no time to do much serial killing myself.

(g) Ostracism Theory

I am such an aggressive person that no-one any longer asks me out to dinner or for a drink. I am reduced to spending my evenings watching television programmes most of which happen to be violent.

(h) Predilection Theory

I am a sadistic psychopath whose two great pleasures in life are watching films like Terminator III and crunching broken beer mugs into people's faces at my local pub.

(i) Conventionality Theory

I am a particularly non-aggressive person with such a fear of violence that I am afraid to go out into the streets at night. I spend my evenings at home watching television's inevitably violent programmes.

(j) Materialism Theory

I watch much television by night and commit many bank robberies by day. But although most of the programmes are violent, envy of the good things of life depicted in them is what excites me and although I do not hesitate to kill any security guard who gets in my way, it is wealth I am after. I view the necessarily aggressive element in my crimes with distaste. If only I were not working class, I could have been a successful City con-man.

2. The Evidence

Another problem is that the only possible conclusion which can be drawn from a thorough review of the huge number of scientific studies designed to test such theories gives victory to neither those who believe that mass media violence does harm or to those who believe it does not. Demonstrated effects are small, and most of the published studies fail to show results sizeable enough for them not to have occurred by chance. In most cases where the subjects are significant at an appropriate statistical level, the mass media violence accounts for only a minute fraction of the factors which may

have caused the aggressive behaviour. At the same time no-one could conclude that the research has clearly demonstrated that mass media violence does not cause aggression. It may be that it does, but the research has failed to show it. The Catharsis Theory, which is my favourite - it has an engaging mixture of tradition (Aristotle and Freud) and perversity (mass media violence is a 'good thing') - comes out worst and Arousal Theory seems to come out best. This is a bit disconcerting as it suggests that humorous or exciting programmes can lead to aggressive behaviour and that mass media violence can lead both to pro-social (good) or bad behaviour.

(a) Laboratory Experiments

Typical experiments show half the subjects watching violent films (a cat v mouse fighting cartoon, if children, or a particularly bloody boxing match, if adolescents) with the other half watching an equally exciting but non-violent film of perhaps acrobats on a high wire. The subsequent aggression is then measured by how closely the children imitate a teacher kicking an inflated toy clown or the frequency and strength of electric shocks students give someone they believe to be a subject in an experiment on learning.

(b) Field Experiments

A typical field experiment is the attempt by Feshbach and Singer (1971) to test the Catharsis Theory by varying the television diet of boys in seven institutions, so that some saw violent and others neutral shows with the house parents keeping records of the subsequent behaviour. The authors thought they had shown that Catharsis Theory worked, but later critics pointed out that the reduction of the aggressive behaviour brought about by the mass media violence was probably due not to the aggression being vicariously discharged but to the film's heightening of the boys' sensibilities about aggressive display.

The field experiments which provide strongest evidence for mass media violence as a cause of aggressive behaviour are two studies with which Leon Berkowitz was associated - Leyens, Camino, Parke and Berkowitz (1975) and Park, Berkowitz, Leyens, West and Sebastian (1977) - in which delinquent



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boys were exposed to either violent films or neutral films for a week and the subsequent measures of aggression showed a forty fold increase in aggression for the violent film group. However, these studies too have been severely criticised on several grounds including the bias introduced by those administering the experiment i.e. undergraduates who may well have been aware of the experimental conditions they were monitoring and were almost certainly aware of Berkowitz's theoretical preferences.

(c) Correlational Studies

Typical correlational studies are those which took advantage of the introduction of television to new audiences to look at its effects. Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince (1958) did this in Britain and Schramm, Lyle and Parker (1961) in Canada and the United States. Joy, Kimball and Zabrach (1986) continued this tradition when they looked at a small community hidden in a valley which had become able to receive television for the first time. Some children were adversely affected, most were not.

The most sophisticated correlational study is by Belson (1978) who studied 1565 boys aged 13-16 in London. He took great care to rule out the possibility that a positive association between television violence and aggressive behaviour could be caused by a third variable like social class and found that boys exposed to high levels of television violence committed 49% more acts of serious violence than those who see little. However, Cumberbatch (1989) scrutinising Belson's data with some care, points out that the graphs in fact show that while high viewers of violence are more delinquent than moderate ones, so too are the lowest viewers of violence.

Nothing in subsequent correlational studies suggests any need to modify a word of Schramm's original conclusion (Schramm, Lyle and Parker 1961 p.13) and to extend it verbatim to films, videos etc:-

"For some children under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children under most conditions, most television is probably neither

harmful nor particularly beneficial."

3. What next?

When a massive research effort over many years fails to produce clear and useful answers, psychologists tend to abandon metaphors about pushing back the frontiers of science and talk instead of gold mines being played out, and ghost towns being left behind while the main railway is moved elsewhere. There are three tell-tale signs which show when this sad point has been reached; all can be seen in the media violence world in recent months.

(a) The best researchers leave the field.

Little kudos attaches to yet another study showing that mass media violence has a minimal affect, and claims are staked in less explored scientific terrain. Little new research has been done on the direct effects of violence in the last five years, and those like Barry Gunter and Malory Wober, with deep involvement in both the applied as well as theoretical issues, have moved on to study other questions like why viewers continue to believe that the matter is of such importance.

(b) **The practitioners take over.** At the beginning of March the Sunday Times brought Michael Medved (Hollywood vs America 1992) to London to put his view that current film violence is a major threat to society at a forum which included several distinguished producers, critics, novelists and editors. Headlines claimed that his book had brought a sea change into the way we think and since the forum it has been difficult to open a newspaper or turn on a television discussion without hearing a procession of producers, critics, psychiatrists, social workers, head teachers, policemen and magistrates giving examples from their experience to suggest that Medved is right. The main report of the forum sought to give an academic figleaf of respectability to all this by quoting a series of sound bytes from some of the more eminent American researchers in the field who, in unguarded moments, seem to have gone well beyond their own data.

(c) **The problem goes away.** Perhaps Medved is right when he writes in his

book (p167)

"Cannibalistic and incestuous elements have become common enough in contemporary motion pictures that they have begun to lose the ability to startle jaded movie goers, forcing enterprising producers to search for new taboos to shatter."?

Although a recent survey of viewers in the TV Times showed that 59% still thought that there was a link between screen and real-life violence, a glance at the recent Easter holiday television schedule showed that it was packed with family classics, and its most violent offering was the James Bond film 'Thunderball'.

The studies referred to can be found listed in the three reviews mentioned: McGuire, W.J. (1986) *The Myth of Massive Media Impact: Savagings and Salvagings*. In G. Comstock (Ed), *Public Communication and Behaviour* (Vol. 1, pp 173-257), Academic Press.

Freedman, J.L. (1986) *Television violence and aggression: a rejoinder*. *Psychological Bulletin*. 100(3)(pp.272-378)

Cumberbatch, G. (1989) *A Measure of Uncertainty. The Effects of the Mass Media*. Broadcasting Standards Council Research Monograph Series: 1. John Libbey.

Medved, M. (1992) *Hollywood vs America*. Harper Collins.

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