The Media’s Influence on Behavior and Violence
Is Society the Victim of the Media?

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Introduction

No one can deny the influence that television and the electronic media have had on children in contemporary American society. Many researchers argue that in fact television no longer reflects culture, but rather is the central cultural arm of American society. It is an agency that enculturates the viewer to its point of view (Heath and Gilbert, 1996, p. 378).

Newspapers and the print media are no less important in their impact and are also part of the electronic media’s web. “In spite of the differences, newspapers show many of the same patterns as television programming. Sex and violence are staples in the newspapers as well” (Heath and Gilbert, 1996, p. 380).

Headlines and news media coverage are presenting stories of more and more violent behaviors, often committed by children of younger and younger ages. Most recently, two boys, ages 7 and 8, were charged with murdering an 11-year-old girl in Chicago. The offenders were reported to be the youngest on record for this type of crime. We were told that the boys killed the young girl so they could have her new bicycle. The crime was similar to one committed by two British youngsters who kidnapped a two-year-old from a shopping mall and stoned him to death with rocks.

Also, a series of recent school killings has left parents and children questioning the safety of the schools, once considered a safe haven for children. Just before the sentencing of two recent child killers, from Jonesboro, Arkansas, one
of the boys, 14-year-old Mitchell Johnson, stated, “I didn’t mean to do it. I thought we were going to shoot over their heads” (Lieb, 1998, p. A1). The younger boy, Andrew Golden, already an award-winning marksman at age 12, had no apology and nothing to say.

I suggest that a major influence on the growth of violent behavior occurs in the prime of a child’s emotional developmental life.

As our children grow and develop attitudes and beliefs about the world and how it works, they are plugged into the electronic media from morning to night. The pictures, images, and sounds they hear are being imprinted practically from birth. If we, as concerned citizens, do not begin to address the presentations of violence, senseless killing, and merged sex and violence in the electronic media, we become at risk for even greater proliferation of such images and the loss of more and younger children to their influence.

This chapter addresses the electronic media’s popularization of violent behavior in our society. Treatments of this topic, both in the news and in popular entertainment areas, have often been irresponsible, inaccurate, and highly sensationalized.

Movies, television, evening news programs, and the print media are filled nightly with images of women as victims, as prey, and as targets of stalkings, anger, hatred, or revenge. These depictions are often linked to sex and violence. Society is saturated with such images, which are portrayed as normal behaviors, suggesting to viewers that they may be acceptable. These illustrations of violent behaviors, including stalking, are sensationalized. Violence and sex frequently are merged, obscuring the fact that they are mutually exclusive behaviors that are inappropriately bound together.

Mugford and O’Malley (1991) found that “leisure is increasingly commodified and, therefore, subject to what Simmel (1950) called neurasthenia: that is each new thrill eventually pales, requiring, therefore, bigger and bigger thrills to excite the faded palate” (p. 11).

The point made by Mugford and O’Malley (1991) is that “in American society today, where image management has become a lucrative business and a matter-of-fact necessity in commerce, industry, politics and personal relationships, style has ripened into an intrinsic form of information” (p. 11). Enter the electronic media with its image projections. In countless aspects of life, the powers of appearance have come to overshadow or shape the way we comprehend matters of substance (p. 14). No other force goes beyond the electronic media’s reach in sending us those images by which we check to see what reality is.

In the visions from the electronic media, there are “two key aspects— the monopolization of physical violence, and lengthening of the chains of socialization of and dependence” (Elias, 1982, p. 31, cited in Mugford and O’Malley, 1991, p. 10).

We plug into our mass media to find out who we are and what we are to do. We don’t think, and we use images of violence to enliven the alienation we feel within ourselves. We tune in and turn on to the media, to be at peace again with
its images, to stimulate our emotional responses, to tell us we can feel, we are alive, and, in some cases, we aren’t that bad.

There is a conflict between those who defend the media and those who suggest the media create violence in our society. Some media defenders argue that the media either have no effect or in fact have a cathartic effect, allowing viewers an outlet for their aggression. The evidence in support of this idea is that most people don’t commit violent crime after viewing thousands of media images depicting these crimes (Bender and Leone, 1988). When these proponents of the media do admit to even a slight chance of media effect, they blame the public for overwatching (Bender and Leone, 1988). Their position is, if people get in trouble with the media, it is because they watch too much television and too many movies. We, in essence, make victims of ourselves.

The contrasting view, held by many political scientists, educators, and criminologists and much of the general public, is that the media do have influence and, in fact, provide our cultural training ground. We learn from the media what our role expectations are in society. Often these role messages are confusing, inaccurate, and distorted. Often they are not counterbalanced with an opposing point of view.

Edgework—the abandonment of calculative rationality in the pursuit of excitement—is the new philosophy of our electronic media productions (Mugford and O’M alley, 1991). Further, edgework is believed to be the seduction at work in the electronic media that causes many to pursue the edgework of excitement through images of violence, sexuality, and gore.

Those who doubt the force with which the electronic media have not only enculturated our society, but become it, need only go to Capitol Hill, where movie stars now represent the mainstream American and are called on with their celebrity expertise to give testimony on everything from the environment and AIDS to abortion rights.

Frequently, when celebrities come out on issues, not only do they get extensive press coverage but their statements receive unmerited attention and respect from members of Congress and others. Often, far more respect is given to celebrities than to educators, parents, and scientists. We need to ask some very poignant questions when our causes are led by celebrity champions. Do these champions truly represent our values and our lifestyles, or are the electronic media promoting their own versions of culture at our expense, thus victimizing their captive audience?

**Attitudes That Pervade Our Culture**

If a girl is seductively dressed, she has lost the right to say no. If a girl says no, she really means yes. Where do people get these attitudes from? Images promoted by the media give women double messages: Be sexy, be alluring, be free—and don’t complain if people think you’re asking for it. Often female victims accept
the blame for their own victimization, making statements such as “I shouldn’t have been there,” or “I shouldn’t have worn this outfit,” or “I shouldn’t have expected him not to want more than a kiss.” Generations of women are told that they should act like sexual objects, play like sexual objects, but if someone crosses the line, it’s the woman’s behavior that caused the action (Jhally, 1990). The electronic media, particularly video and film, foster this point of view.

The cultural messages do not reflect mainstream values—they aren’t even close! What they reflect are the messages presented by soap opera television and the electronic media (particularly MTV). Children today are not shielded from knowledge of anything. They see group sex, masturbation, issues of abortion, sadomasochism, and fetishism at younger and younger ages. A recent documentary film on modern cult behaviors, specific to satanism, states that almost all elementary school children know, for example, that the sign of the devil is 666 (Passport Magazine Productions, 1988). Where do these images come from? Many children state that they see them on television, or in videos or movies.

Research by McCormack (1987) on the presentation of machismo in the media suggests there are two lines of study. One condones pornography as an innocent pleasure without serious social consequences, and the other condemns media violence as leading to senseless brutal acts; however, they are unified when the variable machismo is addressed. Machismo refers to an attitude of male pride and sexual virility, a form of narcissism that condones sexual use and abuse of women and, in the extreme, views violence as a dimension of sexual gratification or instrument of sexual goals.

**Cultural Messages: What Are We Learning?**

The cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner and Gross, 1976) provides the backdrop for much of the work on television’s effect on fear of crime. Gerbner and Gross suggest that “television is the central cultural arm of American society. It is an agency of the established order and as such serves primarily to extend and maintain rather than to alter, threaten, or weaken conventional conceptions, beliefs, and behaviors... Its function is, in a word, enculturation” (p. 175). In regard to fear of crime, Gerbner and Gross suggest that the fear and heightened perceived risk that television may enculture leads to “increased acquiescence to and dependence upon established authority” (p.194). (Heath and Gilbert, 1996, p. 1)

Leonard Eron of the University of Illinois followed 800 children who were in third grade in 1960 until they were 30 years old. He found that the amount of television violence that the children watched at age 8 was the best indicator of their behavior at age 19 (Fayelson, 1987, p. 24).
Movies no longer fade to black to give us a sense of time or points at which we can reflect and consider what we have seen. Rather, “movies are marketed to aim directly to the lowest levels of the mass media, [that is] your brain seeking a reaction that is not only positive, but unconscious and immediate” (Miller, 1990, p. 50). When our primary emotions and drives are focused, we will pay attention.

Video, MTV, and movie presentations focus on our emotions. They use music to override their visual effect. If we listen closely and watch MTV often, we realize the music does not fit the action or visual presentation. “Movies more and more supply us with images that are paradoxically non-visual, because the music tries to force us to shut our eyes, stun our minds and jolt our visceral gut level reactors” (Miller, 1990, p. 50). Special effects are routinely used to portray the annihilation of a person—and it is seen as good! “The wipe-out might be violent, as at the end of Raiders of the Lost Ark when Nazis are melted down or shriveled up by the wrathful ark as light, or as in the horror movies where, say, Jason burns, zaps and mangles several teens, until some teen burns or zaps or manges Jason” (p. 50). We become emotional hostages to the electronic media’s devices, and therefore their victims. Often it is difficult to find the line between hero and villain. The movie Batman, for example, leaves many wondering about Batman and his motivation and use of violence. In Terminator, the title character’s name alone tells us what his mission in life is. In the film Cobra, it is difficult to tell the difference between the hero and the psychopaths he chases (Miller, 1990). Silence of the Lambs depicts the psychopath as the hero. The last line of the film is a comic statement about Hannibal Lecter’s having a friend over for dinner. (We all realize this means eating the friend for dinner, but the audience is brought to laughter, rather than horror.) (Medved, 1992, p. 163)

What Are We Learning from the Media?

In a recent article in Time titled, “Kids Who Kill,” we see that time and time again children state that they don’t have any idea at all why they shot their best friend. They respond, “[I] just did.” Researchers are finding that conscience doesn’t matter. If it does come forth, it will do so after—not before—a kind of “aw, shucks” attitude (Witkin et al., 1991, p. 31).

As many researchers have noted, modeling is a major concern. What gets modeled? What gets internalized? And who’s helping children make the distinction between approved and unapproved aggression? The film The Burning Bed, which depicts the reality of family violence and the difficulty of escaping a former partner’s wrath, even when the marriage is dissolved, shows what may be learned is that the act of murder is the only, final solution. Killing a love partner seems often like the most reasonable solution to a bad relationship.

Researchers have suggested that the effect of pleasant arousal followed by violence desensitizes viewers toward violence. It not only makes violence more
acceptable and exciting, but also, one could argue, more pleasing (Donnerstein et al., 1987, cited by Wilson, 1991).

When images merge sexuality with violence, we must ask what the long-term desensitizing effects might be. Do sexuality and violence merge in the minds of those who are presented a constant barrage of these images? Images of violence and sexuality become blurred as one scene flows into another. Victims may start out saying no, but end up in sexual scenes that appear more like rape than like mutual consent between two loving partners.

A good example of the merging of violence and sex is the opening scene of the movie Basic Instinct. In it the victim is tied to the bed post in what is first presented as consenting sexual play between two partners. Suddenly, sex turns to violence when the male victim, who is tied, is stabbed to death while in the process of climaxing with his female partner. What messages are sent from such depictions of the merging of sex and violence? Are we to view this as the ultimate sexual climax?

In his ground-breaking book Lovemaps, Money (1986) presents case studies demonstrating that violent sexual movies provided some of our most serious violent offenders with the specific erotic fantasies they needed to develop their particular sadistic violent profile and later used on their victims.

Frasier (1974) notes that violence is the perfect grist for entertainment. He says the functions of violence are numerous. “Violence as a release, as self-affirmation, or self-defense or self-discovery or self-destruction; violence as a flight from reality, violence as the truest sanity in a particular situation, and so on” (p. 9). Violence is the edgework philosophy of living on the edge, from thrill to thrill (Lyng, 1990).

The Willing Victim (She Likes It)

What about the victims in the electronic media? How are they portrayed?

Wilson (1991) states that the media tell us “we have an appetite for violence. We need it, crave it, thirst for it, and have built a high tolerance for mayhem and viciousness, as long as the players follow the rules” (p. 145).

Many authors have written about the media’s portrayals of the willing victim. This is one of the most compelling and disturbing types of violence. A scene may start out as a rape or other act of sexual violence and then suddenly show us that the female victim has had a change of heart. This tells viewers, “Don’t worry if she first resists and says no, just be forceful and eventually she’ll want it, like they all do” (Wilson, 1991, p. 136). In his film Dreamworlds, which examines MTV images of women, Jhally clearly shows that women are depicted as wanting sex, pining for sex, needing sex, and, when they say no, really meaning yes.

After repeated exposure to proliferating scenes of graphic sex and violence in the media, some viewers gradually come to think of sex and violence as
belonging together. To clearly and emphatically understand and digest media presentations, we need to distinguish between extremist and mainstream behavior. Many seem to have lost the ability to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

If society accepts the extremes of media presentations as the norm, these presentations gradually become part of the collective consciousness, where they are difficult to erase. Eventually, extreme violence is viewed as the norm, rather than the exception.

**Cultural Norms: Violence Run Amok**

How far has the media gone? In 1991, public television station KQED petitioned the court for permission to televise public executions, arguing that this was covered as a First Amendment right and part of the people’s “right to know.” The petition was denied by the California Supreme Court (Angelo and Hollis, 1991). One can only imagine young children and teens videotaping these executions for later replay.

In *Television vs. America*, Medved (1992) reminds us that “the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has given every one of its most prestigious awards to *Silence of the Lambs*” (p. 164). One of the best examples of how far the media will go to present the gore that it says the audience craves is shown in *Silence of the Lambs*. In the film, the audience is brought to an autopsy and presented with the dead victim’s bloated, naked body, a green and black and blue corpse with its skin peeled away in various places by an unknown assailant. Viewers not only attend the autopsy, but also participate in the slow, methodical autopsy procedure itself. We need to question the need for this procedure to be part of our general media entertainment menu.

Medved (1992) further states, “This penchant for praising the most startling and disturbing forms of entertainment now pervades the entire entertainment industry. It is increasingly obvious that the tendency involved is more than acceptance of ugliness as one aspect of our reality; it amounts to its glorification as the highest aesthetic ideal” (p. 163). As researchers, educators, doctors, and practitioners we need to examine why our society appears to need to view these types of events as the norm, not the extreme.

Critic Stephen Farber’s denouncement of *Silence of the Lambs* was forgotten amid the awards and accolades the film received. So numerous were the awards that it was impossible to view the film as the perverted and twisted slice of life that it portrayed. Medved (1992) asserts that the kudos this film received were not in spite of its ugliness and gore, but because of it (pp. 162, 243).

Medved (1992) states that the compulsion to shock audiences has reached its zenith in the past five years and outlines numerous plots in recent movies that feature cannibalism as a prominent part of the story line. Examples of this new
craze in filmdom appear in many recent releases, including Cape Fear, Fried Green Tomatoes, The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover, Out Cold, Auntie Lee’s Meat Pies, Lucky Stiff, Consuming Passions, Society, Eat the Rich, The People Under the Stairs, and Alive, to name just a few. Filmmakers seem to feel a need to offend in this manner (Medved, p. 245).

“Some film makers,” Medved (1992) reports, “are now using a combination of incest and cannibalism to attract viewers. We are exposed to this new slant in the films, ‘Voyager’ and ‘Sleepwalkers.’ The glorification of ugliness appears to know no bounds” (p. 251).

Farber, the former film critic for California Magazine, states that “it has become chic to praise a movie for being nihilistic, macabre, unsentimental,” and that the greatest movies were the cold-blooded dissection of human venality and depravity (Medved, 1992, p. 162).

Psychologists view cannibalism as the ultimate rage, and the mass media want us to give the idea credibility in our culture. In response to charges that it promotes violence through constant portrayal, the movie industry speaks with a forked tongue, saying,

1. “No one is seriously damaged by the fleeting images or subtle themes in a movie,” and
2. Their “product is more disturbing, violent, and sexually explicit than ever before because they are responding in an honest and artistic way to powerful trends in our society” (Medved, 1992, p. 358).

Could it be true that cannibalism is rampant in the United States? Where are these people, and why haven’t we been informed about this pervasive societal problem? Medved (1992) also reports that in the scientific literature there is mounting evidence of a connection between a violent media and aggressive or antisocial behavior. Among studies completed are “The Surgeon General of the United States Report” and a five-year study by the American Psychological Association that provide conclusive evidence of a correlation between viewing televised violence and having aggressive attitudes, values, and behavior patterns, particularly in children (Medved, 1992, p. 365).

Jennings Bryant of the University of Alabama warns of the “stalagmite effects,” whereby “cognitive deposits build up almost imperceptibly from the drip-drip-drip of television’s electronic limewater.” He warns that the cumulative effects of exposure are potent, and particularly so in adolescents (Medved, 1992, p. 365).

Other researchers warn that violent messages are targeted to the very young and are prominently featured in children’s programming. Children, however, are not the only ones who are affected by the violent viewing. Radecchi asserts that adults who watch TV are more likely to purchase handguns and support military solutions to world problems, as well as overestimate the amount of real violence in the world (Medved, 1992).
The influence of the electronic media is inescapable. Because the media permeate the fabric of our society, we are all vulnerable to the message. We cannot bury our heads in the sand, because the evidence comes at us from all directions in the form of the behavior of those with whom we must interact in our everyday lives. A 1989 article in *Time* notes that kids are fed a steady diet of glorified violence and that “television cartoons feature dehumanized, machine-like characters such as ‘Transformers’ and ‘Gobots’ engaged in destructive acts. But viewers see no consequences, as victims never bleed and never suffer. By 16 years of age the typical child has seen an estimated 200,000 acts of violence, including 33,000 murders” (Toufexis, 1989, p. 168).

From rock music lyrics (by groups such as Guns N’ Roses) to comic books to slasher films—with their graphic erotic scenes of female mutilation, rape, or murder—children are repeatedly given the message that this is what behavior is all about. This is what they are supposed to do. Toufexis (1989) states, “They simply become conformists, not deviants” (p. 168). This is the cultural message children learn.

**The Serial Killer Phenomenon: The Media’s Sensationalization of Serial Killers**

Media images of violence have crossed into the ultra-extremes, and these images have become the training films of our culture. In effect, the electronic media now present the how-tos of the most violent acting-out behaviors as a smorgasbord from which we can pick and choose and adopt our personal favorites.

Many authors, including Wilson, Jenkins, Leyton, Fox, and MacDonald, have written on the increasing popularity of the multiple murderer. The news media have made serial killers one of the most popular topics for crime reporting. We are riveted to news coverage of the mass killer and serial killer. Many of our most popular cinema and TV films now represent serial killers as folk heroes. HBO even does documentary films such as *Murder: No Apparent Motive*, which rivets viewers in their chairs in fear. This film, one could argue, could also be a how-to for serial killers.

Wilson (1991) maintains that it is not uncommon for one sensational killing to get six months of cliff-hanging media reporting, with the prospects of updates. The presentation of true crime by the media is very important. “The challenge,” Wilson tells us, “lies in orchestrating the presentation of the case with exclusive interviews, story revelations, to outclass the competition (other media vying for the same viewer’s attention)” (p. 186).

Because we all get news and information from the electronic media and most of our crime coverage comes on the nightly local channel, Wilson (1991) and others have suggested that the mass media grant disproportionate amounts
of time and space to murders. We tune in nightly to get a sense of where we are in the world and how our immediate neighbors are doing. White (1988) says, “We want to know it’s happening someplace else, so we can feel safer” (p. 106).

On January 27, 1994, a full-page advertisement appeared in the Washington Post urging the entertainment industry to take voluntary steps to reign in television violence before Congress does it for them. At that time polls showed that violence was our nation’s number one concern, even before the economy. In 1998, violence was holding at the number two position. Violence is now a public health issue. Janet Reno, attorney general in the Clinton administration, warned the media industry to change or be prepared for some type of legislation to force change.

A 1992 study by TV Guide concluded that “violence is a pervasive major feature of contemporary television programming and is coming from more sources and in greater volume than ever before” (Hickey, 1992, pp. 10–12). A major longitudinal study done by ERON concluded that television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of both genders, at all socio-economic levels, and at all levels of intelligence (cited by Hickey, 1992, p. 11).

Cultural Lessons

What are we learning? What are some of the victim outcomes?

The media often play directly to the stereotypical abuser by showing images of men with total control over their victims or with the need for total control. Any sign of independence by the victim is seen as unbearable rejection. Men are portrayed in the media as dominating women in whatever way works best. Herman’s (1989) profile of a stalker suggests that stalkers and abusers use the following types of behaviors: dominance by isolation, enforced dependency, jealous surveillance, threats, verbal abuse, meticulous enforcement of petty rules, and even physical exhaustion (pp. 4–6).

In his 1990 film, Dreamworlds, Jhally states that all of these behaviors are part of the depictions of women, by both male and female video stars, on MTV. These presentations of violence and sexuality are viewed through subtle images, catering particularly to adolescent male viewers as a way of capturing their adolescent sexual fantasies and excitement. The media images show penetrating messages that excite the viewer and the audience. Male sexuality is visual, and this information is not lost on advertisers, who market to a generation of children who by and large are their principal viewing audience.

Articles abound on erotomania and the stalking of media personalities. Referring to a syndrome that has also been named “pathological love,” Persaud (1990) describes erotomaniacs as people who bring their disturbed view of pathological love into the open, often by stalking their victims and living in their own world of fantasy (p. 148). Cosgrove (1990) states that star-stalking—obsessively pursuing the rich and famous—“is one of the more sinister by-products of the media age” (p. 31).
The definition of stalking behaviors varies. According to California state law, "a stalker is anyone who willfully, meticulously and repeatedly follows or harasses another person, who makes a credible threat with the intent to place that person in reasonable fear of death or great bodily injury" (Kolarik, 1991, p. 35).

The literature shows that erotomania, or pathological love, is more often perpetrated by males than by females. Persaud (1990) suggests that this may relate to gender differences in violent behaviors in general and that it is not surprising that men may be more predisposed to stalking, because they are more prone to aggression and acting upon their aggression in violent ways.

Considering that nearly 90% of all women murdered were initially stalked by their perpetrators, one needs little more evidence of the growing problem of stalking behavior. Stalkers live in a fantasy world that they cannot distinguish from reality. This is not unlike the world presented to them by the mass media, which often blurs the line between reality and fantasy.

The profile of the stalker is complex; in fact we are told that no single profile exists:

Typically the stalkers are young men between the ages of 20 and 34. They are generally unable to form relationships and resort to fantasized intimacy as a means of legitimizing themselves. Stalkers also have an intense interest in the media, they have demonstrated a history of unsuccessful efforts to establish their identity, and they have a strong desire for attention and recognition. Most stalkers do not harbor any animosity towards their victims until they perceive that their unrequited love has been spurned. At this point stalkers turn violent. (National Rifle Association, 1992, p. 96)

The acceptance of violence as normal behavior needs to be challenged. By producing prolific images that suggest stalking is an option for troubled relationships and a way of dealing with issues of control, the media further legitimize this behavior. Galtung (1990) suggests that cultural violence is defined as "aspects of culture which are the symbolic spheres of our existence" (p. 292). We see these symbolic aspects in religion, ideology, language, art, empirical science, and formal science, and often these symbols are used to legitimize direct or structural violence. Galtung states, “We make violence look right and feel right” (p. 292). We legitimize it, therefore normalizing it. Because we cloud violence, we often are not clear who the bad guy is and who the good guy is.

If our cultural lessons continue to be viewed through the distorted lens of an electronic media that presents us with an overabundance of violent images that constantly reinforce deep-seated attitudes of male dominance and power over others (women in particular), then our society will continue to allow stalking and other violent behaviors to increase. As researchers have suggested, we must clear our vision and remove the opaque lens through which we view society's images (Galtung, 1990, p. 294).
Conclusions and Implications

Some analysts suggest that the question is no longer, What's wrong with our public schools? or Which television shows are okay? but rather, What has happened to the entire social, moral, and developmental fabric of our children's lives? The electronic media, especially television, has introduced radical changes in our lives. The current generation of children needs help now, and the electronic media's influence must be debated at every level within our communities.

We need to understand how complex the issue of violence has become and that it is now interwoven in the fabric of our lives. In one of the most prestigious journals published by the American Medical Association, in a June 1992 special edition, one will find 69 articles relating to violence in our society. Can this leave any doubt as to the seriousness of this problem?

The Journal of the American Medical Association has not forgotten about the media's impact on violence. In an article in their special communication section titled, “Television and Violence: The Scale of the Problem. Where to Go from Here,” Centerwall (1992) states, “The effect of television violence on children and youth first alerted the medical community to the deforming effects the viewing of television violence has on normal child development. Neonates are born with the instinctive capacity and desire to imitate; they do not have an instinct for knowing whether a behavior should be imitated. They will imitate anything, including a behavior that is destructive and anti-social” (p. 3059).

Studies show that infants as young as 14 months old demonstrate the ability to observe and incorporate behaviors seen on television (Centerwall, 1992). By 1990, the average American child age 2-5 was watching over 27 hours of television per week, a number that continues to grow. Serious violence is most likely to erupt at moments of severe stress, and it is precisely at such moments that adolescents and adults tend to revert to their earliest, most visceral sense of what violence is. The learning occurs early in a child's development.

Centerwall (1992) concluded that exposure to television is also a major causal factor behind a large proportion, perhaps even one half, of rapes, assaults, and other forms of interpersonal violence in the United States.

Kochanska (1993) summarizes the origins of moral development from this point of view:

The foundations of the moral self derive from repeated early interactions with consistently available—not threatening, as suggested by early psychoanalysis—caregivers. During the continual early affective exchanges, a young child develops a sense of connectedness and the ability to read others' emotions and to react with distress, empathy and a prosocial activity to others' distress .... Development of a moral conscience is also central to moral development. (p. 325)
Children, however, are bombarded with confusing messages along with images of immoral behaviors that don't result in any punishment or negative effects for the perpetrators. Faced with such ambiguity, children are not able without the assistance of a parent or other adult to understand right from wrong.

Children learn their morality from parents, and the emotional signals that parents give off function as inhibitors of forbidden acts (Kochanska, 1993, p. 325). When true emotion and meaning are stripped away from the contexts of violence and sexuality, as they are in the mass media images that our children are continually bombarded with, children cannot internalize moral judgments of right or wrong, or develop a moral conscience. Therefore everything looks okay to them. The entertainment industry would like us to believe that what they present is in some way neutral and therefore okay for even children to see.

Travers et al. (1993) suggest that to assist children in becoming moral citizens, education is needed that imparts

- A sense of self-respect that emerges from positive behavior toward others;
- Skill in social perspective-taking, that is, asking how others think and feel;
- Moral reasoning about the right thing to do;
- Moral values such as kindness, courtesy, trustworthiness, and responsibility;
- The social skills and habits of cooperation;
- An openness to the suggestions of adults (p. 113).

From this list one can easily see that all mass media viewers, and children in particular, are not often presented situations that give quality examples in which viewers can learn and experience examples of moral dilemmas from which clear understanding of right and wrong can be discerned.

Consequently we have a generation of children raised on credos like “Do your own thing,” “If it feels good, do it,” and so on.

In his article “Kids Are Killing, Dying, Bleeding,” Henkoff (1992) states that juvenile arrests for aggravated assault and forcible rape are rising dramatically. Furthermore, he states that kids are killing each other with no remorse at all. Can we wonder why they haven’t learned remorse, when the electronic media flood us with messages that consistently tell us that violence is the way to solve our problems?

In the movies and on television, many characters either carry a weapon or become a victim, and no one should lose a fight! It is also clear that revenge is always the appropriate way to even the score with an opponent. Children state they need a weapon in order to protect themselves. Consider the following statistics gathered by Feder (1990) about kids and television viewing:

- By the time a child reaches college age, she or he will have viewed 200,000 commercials and 100,000 hours of violent programming.
A typical 16-year-old has seen 250,000 violent acts, including 33,000 dramatized murders and tens of thousands of simulated rapes, assaults, and shootings.

Much of the violence viewed is glorified and perpetuated by heroes, in what are presented as just causes.

The subliminal message is that violence is heroic; guns, knives, and fists are appropriate problem-solving tools.

The American Family Association found that 77% of all allusions to sex on network television were about sex that was outside of marriage.

In addition to watching television, 85% of U.S. teens listen to at least two hours of rock music each day, and perhaps many listen to a great deal more (Briggs, 1988). This means that during her or his teenage years every child will hear 75,000 songs with lyrics like

Slide down to my knees, taste my sword. (Motley Crue, “Tonight We Need a Lover”)

Cause when I go through her, it’s just like a hot knife through butter. (KISS in their song, “Fits like a Glove”)

My sister never made love to anyone else but me; incest is everything it is said to be. (Prince, in his solid gold hit, “Sister”)

Songs about sex, incest, murder, devil worship, necrophilia, sadomasochism, cannibalism, and torture leave nothing to the imagination, and each group seems to try to outdo the others in its assault on society’s basic values of right and wrong.

Many children spend more time with the electronic media than they do with their parents. It is from the media that they learn about family life and family values and what our society is all about. One might even argue that many kids’ primary relationship is with the television, which is introduced from the very earliest moments of their childhoods as the background display of culture.

Television and the electronic media have been likened to narcotics pushed by the cultural elite—the Hollywood–New York crowd of writers, artists, producers, and stars whose sense of values may not reflect what we want our children to view (Plangens, 1991).

In fact, this upper echelon of media moguls, we are told, numbers about 100 people. These 100 or so individuals make our viewing decisions for us, and they will continue to do so as long as we mindlessly accept the fare they produce. These “technocrats . . . tend to mistrust the judgment of ordinary people, and . . . there is a growing commitment to what some observers call ‘lifestyle liberalism.’ At the core of this view is personal autonomy and self-creation” (Woodward, 1992, p. 55).

We are in a culture war. “There are whole libraries of scholarly books and essays attesting to the fact that a culture war is going on in American society. Edu-
cation, the arts, religion, law, politics, and the entertainment media are its most visible battleground” (Woodward, 1992, p. 55). We need to be more aggressive and speak out about what is good TV, especially for kids. To change the media, we need to become part of the process, not the victimized viewers of the process.

**IMPLICATIONS**

How can we change our status as victims? Oskamp suggests that we need to ask some hard questions:

1. Can the electronic media change?
2. Can the electronic media present prosocial values? What does this term mean? Who will it define?
3. Or must the change come from viewers’ uses and reactions to the electronic media presentations?

Is it possible to make the media responsible? Centerwall (1992) asks rhetorically, “Is it true that the television industry operates under a higher standard of morality?” Apparently not. “Even before the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence published its recommendations for the television industry, the four major networks stated that . . . there would be no substantive changes in programming content” (p. 3061).

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that pediatricians advise parents to limit their children's television viewing to one to two hours per day. Centerwall (1992) suggests that children’s exposure to television and television violence be made part of the public health agenda, along with safety seats, bicycle helmets, immunizations, and good nutrition. New program labeling for parents is a good start, but is still confusing to many.

Koop and Lundberg (1992) state: “We believe violence in America to be a public health emergency, largely unresponsive to methods thus far used in its control” (p. 3076). They suggest a three-pronged approach that persons in authority can adopt:

1. Support additional research on the causes, prevention, and cure of violence.
2. Stimulate the education of all Americans about what is known and what can now be done to address this emergency.
3. Demand legislation intended to reverse the upward trend of firearm injuries and deaths—the most serious and out-of-control result of violence (p. 3076).

There is no one formula for solving the problem of violence and its portrayals in our society—only multifaceted approaches will serve. Violence, society, and social problems are all ultimately intertwined.
Articles in Fortune (1992) and TV Guide (1992) suggest some ways that we as a society can deal with the violence problem:

1. Help parents to be parents.
2. Teach children how to manage anger.
3. Keep guns away from kids.
4. Watch TV with our children.
5. Discuss violence with our children.
6. Explain that violence is faked for entertainment and is not real.
7. Encourage children to watch programs with characters who cooperate with, help, and care for each other.
8. Make television part of the public health agenda (like smoking and drunk driving) and publicize this through vigorous public information campaigns.
9. Establish courses in critical-viewing skills as a regular aspect of high school curricula.
10. Support the resolution of the American Psychological Association urging broadcasters and cable industries to “take a responsible attitude in reducing direct imitable violence in live action children's shows and violent incidents in cartoons” (Henkoff, 1992; Hickey, 1992, p. 23).

There are many other suggestions stated by the authors and publishers of the research, but we need to be mindful that violence against children undermines the very foundation of our culture. Beyond controlling guns, we need to reassert the principles of parental and community responsibility (Henkoff, 1992). Television may be the most important catalyst to moving our society to a common sense of values—it is in most homes, and is on several hours a day. The electronic media need to be responsible about the depiction of violence and the reality of its outcomes. Films, television, and other media rarely show the real outcomes of violence. After a violent act, we seldom see people in pain, recovering from injuries or coping with permanent disabilities. It may be because real pain and loss are not salable commodities, unlike the sanitized violence and sex offered by the entertainment industry. In this mainstream view of sex and violence, anything goes—with no bad outcomes or messy consequences for even the most reckless behavior. The message is: Just do it!

**MONEY TALKS**

The electronic media are fed by money, pure and simple. Advertisers can pay up to $1 million for spot commercials with large audiences. We all need to choose our products wisely, because money talks for us through the electronic media.

As parents, when we see television shows with content that is not appropriate for young viewers, we need to become responsible and write to the CEOs of
these companies to complain and boycott their advertisers' products. Major sponsors often market their products with references to teens who cheat in school, drink, curse, and smoke; anti-Semitic and racial stereotypes; sexualized images of children; and so on. The violence problem pervades our culture. It is not possible to remove ourselves from the influence of the electronic media; hence, we need to become part of the solution to the problem. The media need to be held accountable for their effect on society.

As criminal justice students and professionals committed to our own fields of expertise, we need to continue our vigilance, particularly as it relates to influences in society that are assaulting us daily. We must challenge the mass media moguls and pressure policymakers to place the burden of responsible behavior squarely in their hands.

Violence is a number one concern—a priority for future generations—our children. There are no clear-cut answers. Our society must link together to face this critical dilemma. We cannot ignore this problem in the hope that it will go away on its own, through the magic of television or any other media presentation.

Accountability for everyone and action against the problem are necessary if we are to turn back the tide of violence lapping at our doors. Every citizen has an obligation to help create a society in which people are not threatened by an entertainment culture that accepts violence as a way of life.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Developmental psychologists have long known the crucial role that a child's social–emotional development plays in his or her conscious development and ability to use reflective moral thought. Spending hours in front of the television interferes with this process. Children may consider television the critical role model in their lives, rather than family and the values it represents.

Further research must be done, and done now. We need to declare war on the media's presentation and packaging of violence to our society. Nothing short of waging our own media blitz will stop this wave from continuing to wash over all of us. Shall we wait to get the definitive answers to causality, or can we assume intellectually that something is being presented to our youth and society at large that can no longer be tolerated?

References


