Does Violence in the Media Cause Violent Behavior?

By Michael Craig Miller, *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, 08843783, Sep2001, Vol. 18, Issue 3

To what extent does viewing media violence change feelings or behavior? As Gladiator wins the Oscar for Best Picture and the television series, "The Sopranos," is acclaimed by sophisticated reviewers, the political debate about media violence continues, and the questions surrounding research on its effects seem as relevant as ever.

There is abundant evidence that a great many of us like violent entertainment. It has attracted audiences throughout history. The gladiatorial combat depicted so realistically in last year's award-winning movie is one example from the ancient world. Medieval tournaments and modern boxing and football are other examples. Epic stories in many cultures recount life-and-death conflicts. According to Aristotle, when tragic violence was properly structured in ancient Greek drama, it aroused pity and terror and afforded an opportunity for helpful catharsis. Violence is no less common in Shakespeare's tragedies, with their high body count.

Images of death are the subject of some of the earliest mass-produced sketches and photographs. Publishers of mid-nineteenth century newspapers and magazines quickly learned that violent stories and images attract readers. The circulation of Harper's Weekly jumped from 75,000 to 120,000 when it published an illustrated story of adultery and murder involving a congressman and his wife. A century and a half later, a survey of television news found that more than half of the stories had violent themes, and "bad news" was placed early in broadcasts.

The intense coverage of Timothy McVeigh's execution, even the desire of many to view his death, provides another contemporary example of this curiosity. The justification for public executions -- common before the 20th century -- was that viewing them would be instructive and a deterrent to crime. But most people in the large crowds that came to watch surely were concerned neither about educating themselves nor about public policy.

Paralleling violence in entertainment is the violence that has always been a part of human life. Anyone who considers the 3000-year history of Jerusalem need look no further for both historical and contemporary evidence of the human propensity to resolve conflicts by resorting to violence. Aggressiveness, hostility, sensation-seeking, and risk-taking have useful functions in appropriate contexts. Evolutionary biologists would even argue that our violence and aggression are products of natural selection that have been preserved for their survival value.

Research results

The research demonstrates that viewing violence does not generally evoke a catharsis with calming effects, but rather tends to stir angry and aggressive feelings. In one study, people watching violent films thought more aggressive thoughts and showed a rise in blood pressure. In another, people who were already highly aggressive were most affected by violent media. They were more likely to watch violent films and more likely to respond with anger and aggression.

Context is also important. Viewers were more likely to behave aggressively if they watched with companions who expressed aggressive feelings. When subjects all see the same violent film, it is rated as less intense by those who have seen a prior clip suggesting a justification for the violence. If pain and other kinds of harm are shown, the violence is less likely to be imitated. Scenarios that include rewards and punishments and otherwise show the consequences of violence apparently reduce the likelihood of hostility in viewers.

In one representative study that demonstrates how such research is done, people were shown either violent or non-violent films for four days. A few days later, they participated in what they thought was an unrelated study of emotions. In this study, research assistants acted abusively toward some of the subjects. Later, when they were put in a position to retaliate, both those who had been provoked and those had been exposed to violent films (but not provoked) showed an increase in hostile behavior. Although men were more aggressive than women overall, exposure to violent films influenced the behavior of both sexes equally.

But what do such findings indicate about behavior outside the laboratory setting? That is the crux of the debate on social effects of media violence. There is general agreement that violent behavior is influenced by many factors, including innate or acquired hostility or aggressiveness and attitudes, beliefs, and values related to violence. Situations and circumstances are also important; violence is more likely to occur when a person feels frustrated, uncomfortable, insulted, or attacked. There is evidence that in a vulnerable person, viewing screen violence may increase the risk of violent behavior by contributing to the acquisition of traits that create a predisposition to violence.

How does that come about?

Some researchers believe that several processes are involved. They contend that television and films can induce aggressive thoughts, provide models of violence to be imitated, and desensitize viewers to the consequences of violence by reducing their ability to consider a victim's fear, pain, or loss. Repeated exposure, they suggest, promotes indifference to violent behavior and leads viewers to believe that violence is an acceptable way of responding to stress or managing anger and frustration.

Special attention has been given to the impact of seeing numerous violent images over a long period of time. There are well-publicized cases of possible direct imitation; for example, some journalists noted that the film The Matrix had been released in the month before the Columbine tragedy and may have served as a model for the perpetrators. Unfortunately, such exceptional cases are impossible to predict and prevent. From a public health perspective, a more important issue than unique and highly publicized tragedies is the extent to which cumulative media violence encourages or strengthens aggressive attitudes and behavior patterns in the population as a whole. Do some people model their behavior on a composite of aggressive heroes drawn from numerous images over years of viewing?

We certainly have plenty of models to draw on. The frequently quoted National Television Violence Study (NTVS) analyzed 10,000 hours of television programming for violent content during a three-year period. About 60% of programs contained violence, and only 15% of those programs showed its long-term consequences. About 40% of the "bad" characters went unpunished, and in almost three-quarters of the scenarios, violence was presented without remorse, criticism, or penalties. More than half of the programs failed to associate violence with pain, and more than a third of the perpetrators were physically attractive. In the third year of the study, fully two-thirds of prime-time network programs contained violence. Some estimate that a preschool child who watches two hours of cartoons a day (about the American average) will be exposed to nearly 10,000 violent incidents a year. According to their calculations, an 11-year-old will have viewed 8000 murders and 100,000 other acts of television violence. And the children and young adults who watch so much TV are also exposed to violent images in films and video games.

Considering both laboratory research and the NTVS data, it is not surprising that some experts think media violence significantly distorts the viewer's impression of the world. The pervasiveness and broad acceptance of these media images creates an understandable concern that unhealthy attitudes toward violence are being systematically reinforced.

The "reel" world and the real world

Reasonable people can and do disagree about the interpretation and significance of the data. For example, some conclusions about the effects of the media are based on the claim -- not proven, according to critics -- that small children have trouble distinguishing between television violence and violence among real people. As interesting as the research may be, and despite the advocacy of individuals and professional groups (including professional organizations of pediatricians, psychologists, and psychiatrists), the appropriate public response is still not clear.

First, how should we weight these findings? In the real world, the influence of the mass media is often drowned out by numerous other social, psychological, and biological factors. Since virtually the entire society is exposed to violent media, it is difficult to find populations for comparison. Other industrialized countries with similar mass media have much lower rates of violent crime than the United States.

Furthermore, apart from violent media images, many children are exposed to crime, drug addiction, and child abuse or neglect, all of which have been more clearly demonstrated to contribute to violence. Critics point out that the most important influences on the rate of violence in a society are child-rearing practices (including child abuse) and the workings of the justice system. In a recent study conducted in an urban setting where 40% of the children were receiving public assistance, all had been exposed to media violence, but 97% had also been directly exposed to real-world violence. Almost half had been victims of violence themselves, and almost a third had seen a person stabbed, shot, or killed.

Peer relationships are always influential in forming attitudes toward violence, and they become more important when absent parenting creates a vacuum. Furthermore, some people are genetically predisposed to irritability, impulsiveness, or aggressiveness. Neurological problems, including head injury, can increase the risk of violence. Some children and adults have difficulty thinking about non-violent responses to conflict because of intellectual limitations with a biological or social basis. Psychiatric disorders, including mood disorders and psychotic illnesses, also contribute to the risk of violence. Another important influence is access to weapons, or living in a culture where weapons are available.

Although media violence may be neither a necessary nor a sufficient cause of any individual's violent actions, that does not mean it should be ignored. When the National Rifle Association tells us that "Guns don't kill people, people kill people," it is trying to neutralize the legitimate issue of access to weapons by pointing out that weapons alone do not produce violence. Most people are not deceived by the slogan, and in the same way, awareness of the many causes of violence should not make us disregard the data linking violent media to aggressive thinking and behavior in some people.

Evaluating the urgency of this problem is inherently subjective. Do we romanticize the good old days? Do we nostalgically dream of an imaginary time when life was less complicated by vivid forms of communication and entertainment? Probably we do. The debate about violent subject matter is not new -- it was an issue in the nineteenth century (newspapers and magazines) and the first half of the twentieth (radio). Although the media's emphasis on violent stories causes us to

perceive violence as a growing problem, there is little reason to think that today we live in the most violent society or most violent era of human history.

We have to weigh not only the various influences on the risk of violence, but also the competing values involved. Even if we could accurately predict the effect of restricting media violence, for example, how much censorship would be desirable to achieve that end? This is a central issue in the political and economic debate. The researchers and politicians who argue for more restrictions on violent programming often say that the relationship between media violence and aggressive behavior is statistically almost as strong as the connection between smoking and lung cancer. Researchers describe the defensive stance of the entertainment industry as similar to the maneuvers of the tobacco companies in their efforts to refute scientific evidence. By using the analogies of tobacco and firearms, critics of the entertainment industry join two touchstone issues, public health and public safety. The question is whether either analogy is appropriate.

Even after the entertainment industry's economic motivations are stripped away, the choices would still not be clear, because the human desire for storytelling will remain, and this desire has always included an interest in violent tales. We want to be told good stories, and we want to satisfy our curiosity about things that frighten us. When cast as a human desire for narrative rather than a perverse pleasure in violence, the production of violent media seems less sinister. Besides, ideas about the acceptable level of fictional violence vary widely, and most people believe others are more influenced by violent media than they themselves are.

Maybe the appropriate analogy is not censorship, or the regulation of tobacco or firearms, but traffic rules. The roads can accommodate a variety of driving styles because there are guidelines -- traffic signals and speed limits that vary depending on the type of road. The mass media might serve their own and the public interest better if the level of violence was similarly moderated. We cannot expect much self-regulation in a business where unilateral disarmament may lead to vast financial losses, but we can perhaps come to some agreement about what the limit may be within each media conduit.

It is of fundamental importance, however, that any accommodation between the government and the entertainment industry be based on an acknowledgement of the research and its limitations. One kind of compromise is suggested by a 1999 study demonstrating that stories can be made more enjoyable for more people when violence is reduced. In the study, movies were shown with graphically violent images edited out. Women enjoyed the edited films significantly more, and men enjoyed them just as much.

As Aristotle implied in his discussion of tragedy, the dramatist's talent and our receptiveness to it determine whether we find a program or film satisfying or repulsive. Caryn James of the New York Times wrote in her admiring review of "The Sopranos," "The issue should not be about graphic scenes themselves, but about how purposefully that freedom is used." We want to be safe from violence and we want to be free to enjoy good stories. With some effort, we may be able to achieve a reasonable balance between that safety and that freedom.