



Medicine for Managers

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Does Television and the Media make us violent?

Since the 1960s, increasing research evidence has been accumulating to suggest that the diet of continual violence seen at the cinema, on television, and on video games and the internet has increased the possibility of aggressive behaviour in the viewer. Whatever the nature of the violence, its consequences can be serious. So, are 'Game of Thrones', 'Spartacus', 'Cold Blood' or the notorious 'Gangs of London' so bad for us?

When you think about it, almost every big ticket movie at the cinema and most serials on the television include violent death(s). *Above Suspicion*, *And Then There Were None*, *Bancroft*, *Broad Church*, and even *Endeavour*, *Midsomer Murders* and *Death in Paradise* all have regular deaths to be managed and killers to be identified. Indeed, thank goodness that *Midsomer* is fictional because, with murders well into the hundreds, the population must be near extinction!

Our media is now saturated with violence. The mass media has had an enormous impact on the behaviour, beliefs and the values of children. As evidence has accumulated it has become much more apparent that media violence pervades every aspect of life and increases the risk of violence.

Furthermore, electronic communication through mobile telephones, chat rooms, etc. has expanded the scope for threats and aggression which has resulted in victimisation, particularly

in the country's youth. The safety engendered within the family unit has been diluted and often usurped.

The experts tell us that the solution is not to keep children away from dangers by stopping them interacting with others, but instead to help them understand the dangers of the media, and others who might espouse violence, and to employ a mixture of reassurance and control of exposure to help keep them safe.

Social science research suggests that watching violence, particularly on television, can have a major impact on young viewers in a number of ways:

1. The depiction of violence may provide the manner and encourage children to learn how to be aggressive, both in attitude and physical violence.
2. Violence displayed on the television may cultivate fearful or pessimistic attitudes

3. The universal existence of violent media broadcasts may desensitise children to fantasy violence but also to the violence occurring in the real world as displayed on the news bulletins.

Publications 30 years ago revealed evidence that heavy exposure to televisual violence caused aggressive behaviour, both in the research laboratory and in real life studies.

The research also demonstrated that the impact of violence is distributed across both genders in children and adults of all ages and of all socio-economic backgrounds.

Similar findings occur in all countries with the same access to electronic media, film and television. Worryingly, even in the mid-1990s, around three-fifths of all programmes were found to have some degree of violent behaviour in the period after the start of the early evening broadcasts.

A detailed research study over a three-year period reviewed overt depiction of physical force, or the threat of such force intended to cause harm up to and including death to any animate being or group.

It was recognised that such violence induces fear and anxiety but may also glamourise, sanitise or even glorify violence and it does not usually convey any sort of anti-violence message or emphasise the adverse consequences of such behaviour.

Affected individuals may be attracted to violence and is predictable if they watch such programmes.

It may be seen as justified, particularly if it is shown to be inflicted by people who are attractive or it is carried out in any sort of humorous way.

The impact worsens if the violence is more graphic or extensive. Studies have also shown that the learning of aggression may be inhibited if the transmission of the violence is unjustified, or shows the perpetrators captured and punished.

Fear in the minds of viewers may be significantly increased in terms of their engagement with day-to-day living especially if:

- The victim is attractive
- It is very severe, graphic, realistic and unjustifiable

People who watch violence regularly, when questioned about their day-to-day perceptions of life, see their environment as less pleasant, more frightening and more dangerous than others who do not watch violence regularly.

Appropriate punishment of perpetrators reduces fear of violence.

Not only is it important to understand the impact that broadcast violence can have on viewers, but it is necessary to appreciate whether and to what degree tolerance and desensitisation occur. Evidence tends to suggest that it is a particular concern that longterm viewing of severe and graphic violent behaviour may lead to progressive desensitisation.

The recognition of the consequences of broadcast violence in the media in cinemas, and more recently on television, resulted in the introduction of rating systems, broadcasting of some programmes only after the 'watershed', providing parental controls to stop children accessing violent, and other types of programmes when considered inappropriate. In the UK, the ratings are:

- G: General audiences
- M: Mature audiences, parental discretion
- R: Restricted -Under 16 not admitted unless accompanied by adult
- X: Persons under 16 not admitted

Now, the science:

Recurrent exposure to violence may have short-term and long-term effects:

Short Term Effects:

1. Priming. In simple terms stimulation through observed violence spreads through the brain's neural network to brain centres involved in cognition, emotion and behaviour, linking current to previous violence exposure. For example, seeing a gun may link to the concept of aggression. Potentially violence is intensified making aggression more likely.

2. Arousal. In circumstances where aggression or violence causes stimulation, additional stimulation causes greater aggressive responses and provocation, with suppression or reduction in inhibition.

3. Imitation. Evidence has accumulated that human (and primate) young mimic whatever they observe. Simply children watching violence will imitate it. Although not fully understood, it is held to be likely that '*mirror neurons*' will be triggered when such behaviour is displayed.

Long Term Effects:

1. Observational Learning. Behaviour is associated with understanding what is appropriate and with observed social beliefs. It is imitated long after it has been seen and is incorporated into mental 'scripts'. If the individual is repeatedly exposed to the same noxious stimuli, the observed and established social beliefs may not be filtered out as inappropriate in normal societal behaviour.

2. Desensitisation is associated with the development of habituation and extreme violence or bloodthirsty, gory displays of extreme behaviour decline in intensity. Further development of the individual results in patterns of behaviour ceasing to filter out inappropriate social response to violent events and the child becomes 'desensitised', resulting in the ability to undertake aggressive acts without experiencing negative effects.

3. Enactive Learning. Conditioning occurs during growth and maturation. Repeated experiences reinforce particular behaviours, and encourage stimulation of violent behaviour.

For those of us who were children from the 1980s, the increase in exposure to violence has been colossal.

In the UK, research suggests that children aged 5 to 16 spend:

- 2 – 3 hours watching television
- 1 – 3 hours on the internet
- 1 – 2 hours playing internet games
- 1+ hours on the telephone

This represents somewhere between 5 and 9 hours a day where access to noxious and harmful violence may be freely available.

Multiple experiments with children tested with a violent film clip or a violent video game behave more aggressively immediately afterwards.

With aggressive video games, researchers showed that boys would be aggressive more frequently towards fellow players the longer the game was played.

With age groups from young children to older adolescents, increased aggression was associated with increased violence, increased observation of violence and the characters receiving more reward for being violent.

Findings were reproducible across studies in different parts of the world.

In Summary, exposure to media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour in children and adults. Priming and imitation seem to be the most important factors.

The big question is whether the effect should be regarded as a public health threat?

Researchers believe the answer to be “yes”. They justify their assertion by pointing out that the findings are statistically very significant and also that the effect sizes in their research

compare well with effect sizes for other public health threats such as, for example, smoking and lung cancer.

It is hard to see how any action could be at all successful in moderating the diet of violence to which we are now all subjected and it seems likely that we shall simply have to accept that the world will inevitably become increasingly violent.

I was brought up before the days of ubiquitous violence and don't much enjoy it on television.

I am more of a “Sound of Music” kind of man and a wartime German SS man being beastly to an Austrian Naval Captain is enough for me!!



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