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ABSTRACT

To some degree television is the current inheritor of anxiety over the effects of communications from outside the home, and is not alone among mass media in presenting sizeable amounts of violence. However the accessibility, pervasiveness, and very character of television make it the ultimate mass medium, and hence a cause for concern. Television violence is likely to be a continuing phenomenon because it is the product of the medium's response to its competitive environment, and it fits well its particular story telling needs. Experiments have found that the likelihood of aggression is increased by exposure to televised violence, and under certain conditions this likelihood is increased further. However, there is little evidence to support the claim that television violence desensitizes viewers to real life violence. It has been found among adults that heavier viewers consistently perceive a world more in line with that portrayed in television drama than lighter viewers. The evidence on desensitization and fearfulness is too limited to draw broad conclusions. The evidence on aggressiveness is much more extensive but does not in itself support a conclusion of increased anti-social aggression. (WBC)

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Since the early 1950s, there have been no less than seven congressional hearings focused on the issue of television violence. Most of these have been major Senate hearings conducted by such well-known figures as Kefauver and Pastore. The recent hearings conducted in Los Angeles and other cities by Congressman Lionel Van Deerlin would bring the total to eight. In addition, media violence was the subject of a voluminous staff report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence in 1969,[1] and in 1972 the Surgeon General's study of television violence concluded with the publication of five volumes reporting on $1 million in new research and the interpretative report of a specially-assembled advisory committee.[2]

The major question addressed by these inquiries is whether violent television entertainment contributes to greater aggressiveness on the part of young viewers. The same question has been addressed in various ways by numerous social and behavioral science studies in addition to those conducted under the Surgeon General's program. It has also been the subject of wide attention by journalists, the public, and the television industry.

Spokesmen seeking support for their views have often engaged in hyperbole and exaggeration. When the noted psychiatrist Frederic Wertham called television a "school for violence" he coined an apt metaphor for its programming,[3] because portrayals of varieties of

human violence have been frequent, but the implied result of greater violence in everyday life does not necessarily follow from its frequency on the screen. Critics of television typically have been zealous in promulgating the error that effect can be inferred from content alone. On the other hand, the television industry, as the staff report to the national violence commission documents,[4] until recent years has been disingenuous in arguing before congressional hearings and elsewhere that there has been no empirical evidence suggesting harmful effects of violent programming and in promising new research on the issue that did not materialize.

Amidst the often loud voices, the empirical evidence of social and behavioral science offers a stabilizing corrective. There are many questions yet to be answered, and many of the answers we have must be taken as tentative and requiring qualification and therefore legitimately subject to some degree of skepticism. Nevertheless, social and behavioral science is very much like the law and its rules of evidence in that there is no guarantee that those who turn to it will reach the correct answer but only that they will be protected from some of the errors of preconception and passion.

Television and Other Media

It should be understood that television is not unique among popular communications in being attacked for possibly detrimental influences on the young. Almost every medium we have known has been the target of such attacks. Plato in The Republic advocated censorship to protect children from the presumably unfavorable effects of certain stories, poems, and legend. The fairy tales of Grimm and Anderson

were attacked at the turn of the century as excessively frightening. Pulp fiction, comic books, and movies have all been criticized for adversely influencing the young, particularly through their presentations of violence. Segregationists in the South opposed the intermixing of black and white rabbits in an edition of Peter Rabbit. To some degree, then, television is simply the current inheritor of anxiety over the effects of communications from outside the home.

It should also be understood that television entertainment is not alone among mass media in presenting sizable quantities of violence. Besides comic books, television news, newspaper front pages, popular magazine fiction, and movies have all been shown to present notable amounts of violence.[5]

Special Characteristics of Television

There are, however, a number of reasons why television entertainment properly merits our concern. First, it is present in almost all homes. Second, children have extensive access to it. Third, control over viewing by parents is apparently such an arduous task that, while certainly not uncommon, it is not typical or extensive.[6] Fourth, the combination of visual and aural elements, equalled only by the far less accessible and frequently viewed theatre movie, have a particular potential for influence on behavior.[7] Fifth, television makes none of the demands on literacy of print media and requires almost nothing in the way of purposive seeking or selectivity, as do other media except for radio, because it is always at hand. In short, the accessibility, pervasiveness and ubiquity, and very character of television make it the ultimate mass medium.

It has been argued that if it were not for television, young people would spend more time with comic books and movies, both of which often are violent. This is probably true, but overlooked is the fact that one effect of the popularity of television has been to increase markedly the total time spent with the mass media.[8] The empirical data are confined to adults, but the finding undoubtedly holds for children. Television, then, represents an increase in the likelihood of their exposure to mass media violence. Furthermore, although television violence has oscillated over the past decades, rising with signs of popularity before falling when the increase saturates public demand or the industry reacts to protests, the trend -- at least until recent efforts to reduce violence -- has been upward.[9] Each time after a decline the new peak has been higher than the last. The increase has been correlated with a similar trend in theatre movies, and it seems likely that competition with this other medium is responsible. Television violence is also encouraged by the nature of the medium, which requires hasty concoctions of exciting drama, visually compelling events, and conflict among humans that can be resolved in a climactic action. Television violence is likely to be a continuing phenomenon because it is the product of the medium's response to its competitive environment and fits inordinately well its particular storytelling needs.

Numerous studies have documented that the quantity of violence in television entertainment is large. Typically, efforts to reduce violence have decreased killings or the number of persons engaged in violent action, but not the frequency of violent incidents.[10]

What does social and behavioral science have to say about the effects of television violence? The most attention has been given to the possibility that television violence increases the likelihood of aggressiveness and violence on the part of viewers, particularly young viewers. In addition, there has been some attention to the questions of whether such mass media violence desensitizes viewers to real-life violence in their environment or creates excessive anxiety and a false perception of the degree of threat to safety existing in our society.

Aggression and Violence

Early, large-scale studies of the effects of television involving thousands of American children in the late 1950s, when it was still possible to compare communities with and without television, found no contribution of television viewing per se to aggressiveness.[11] Exposure to amount of violent television itself was not measured. This finding, that mere quantity of television viewing is unrelated to aggression, has been confirmed by various other more recent studies.[12]

In 1963, two laboratory-type experiments were published which demonstrated that exposure to television violence increased the likelihood of aggressive behavior on the part of young viewers immediately subsequent to viewing. In one, nursery school children were found to imitate what they had seen.[13] In the other, college-age subjects manuevered into acting aggressively toward another person were found to behave more aggressively.[14] These two studies were followed by numerous experiments further exploring the conditions in the television portrayal and in the environment on which such

aggressive effects are contingent.[15]

These experiments consistently found that the likelihood of aggression is increased by exposure to television violence. The conditions which increase the likelihood of such an outcome have been found to include reward or lack of punishment for the perpetrator of violence;[16] presentation of the portrayed violence as justified;[17] circumstances in the portrayal which match circumstances in the real-life environment;[18] depiction of the perpetrator of violence as similar to the viewer;[19] depiction of the violence as truly aggressive and motivated by an intent to injure;[20] and, perception of the violence as real rather than fictional.[21] There is very little evidence to support the hypothesis that violent portrayals typically reduce aggressiveness by catharsis through vicarious participation, although such an effect probably occurs for certain individuals.[22] When such portrayals do reduce subsequent aggressiveness, the result appears to be attributable to the arousal of anxiety over aggression leading to its inhibition.

At the time of the Surgeon General's study, which concluded in 1972, there were about 50 of these experiments. On their basis alone, many were ready to argue that television violence should be considered a contributor to greater aggressiveness in real life on the grounds that the causal link established in the laboratory could only lead to the conclusion that the probability of some everyday influence in that direction was likely. Laboratory-type experiments, however, have their weaknesses as well as their strengths. A principal strength is that they permit causal inference because the influence

of factors other than the hypothesized cause are controlled. A weakness is that their artificiality -- in the setting, the immediate measurement of the effect, and the use of substitutes for real-life aggression, such as hitting a Bobo doll in the case of the nursery school children or the delivery of electric shocks to an unseen victim in the case of the college-age subjects -- leave some doubt about generalizability to real-life events. The experiments typically do not allow for reprisal, a possibility in real life that by itself might be enough to deter any aggressive impulses aroused by television.

What the Surgeon General's study added was a positive correlation, in a variety of surveys, between everyday violence viewing and aggression among adolescents in everyday, real life.[23] The same surveys were consistent with the early studies of the late 1950s in not showing a similar relationship between amount of viewing and aggressiveness. Only when amount of violence viewing was isolated did the relationship with aggression occur. These surveys also indicated that the correlation between violence viewing and aggressiveness was not attributable to a greater preference by more aggressive youths for violent entertainment. Furthermore, the positive correlation remained after such variables that so frequently dissolve relationships as socioeconomic status, sex, and school achievement were taken into account.

These varied strains of empirical evidence lead to the tentative acceptance of the proposition that television violence increases aggressiveness on the part of young viewers. The laboratory-type experiments demonstrate a causal relationship, although the price for that demonstration is a certain artificiality that raises questions

about real-life generalizability. The surveys demonstrate a real-life relationship, although they do not by themselves permit causal inference. This convergence is further supported by a very few experiments in naturalistic settings to which the criticisms of the laboratory-type experiments do not apply, although by themselves they would not supply incontrovertible evidence of causation because the conduct of experiments in naturalistic settings often is at the price of some rigor of design which lessens, at least to a slight degree, confidence in the control of other, possibly contaminating influences.

There are a number of necessary qualifications. The conclusion rests on the consistency of findings from a variety of sources, and not on a single, encompassing demonstration. It is possible that the result of each class of research has its own artifactual explanation, although their consistency makes this seem unlikely. There is no reason to think that they are all negative. There are also some studies which indicate that exciting, physiologically arousing portrayals, whether violent or not, may increase the level of subsequent aggression or other behavior.[24] Such findings do not exculpate violent portrayals, which are probably inherently arousing and also provide examples of violent behavior that may be performed, but they do alert us to the complexity of the psychological factors involved in effects of the media on behavior. Most important, the evidence does not tell us anything about the degree of social harm or criminal antisocial violence that may be attributable to television. It may be great, negligible, or null.

Desensitization

It has often been claimed that television violence desensitizes viewers to real-life violence. There is very little evidence. One investigator reports that violent portrayals had less physiologically-measured emotional impact on young persons who were heavy viewers of television.[25] Another found that children exposed to television violence were immediately thereafter slower to call for adult intervention when children at play they were assigned to supervise became destructive.[26] These scant findings hint of desensitization, but no more.

Anxiety and False Perception

Since the 1967-1968 season, a series of studies have annually measured the quantity and character of violence in one fall week of primetime and Saturday morning network programming.[27] One by-product of this monitoring has been a detailed, empirical record of the way television drama portrays the world in terms of probability of falling victim to violence, percent of crimes which are violent, percent of white males in law enforcement, and the like. When large samples of adults have been queried about their own perceptions, heavier viewers consistently perceive the world more in line with that portrayed in television drama than lighter viewers. This difference is particularly striking because it holds for men and women, persons of greater and lesser education, and those with greater and lesser exposure to television and newspaper news. Although it is not proper to attribute causation to television from these data, they are suggestive that television drama, and particularly television violence where many of the relevant portrayals appear, creates an impression of the world that is both false and more fear-provoking.

Conclusion

It is tempting to conclude that television violence makes viewers more antisocially aggressive, somewhat callous, and generally more fearful of the society in which they live. It may, but the social and behavioral science evidence does not support such a broad indictment.

The evidence on desensitization and fearfulness is too limited for such broad conclusions at this time. The evidence on aggressiveness is much more extensive, but it does not support a conclusion of increased antisocial aggression. Such a conclusion rests on the willingness of the person who chooses to sit in judgment to extrapolate from the findings on interpersonal aggression to more serious, nonlegal acts.

We know from the experiments on college-age subjects that violent portrayals may lead to a higher level of aggressiveness when they engaged in aggression immediately after viewing. We also know that young children may imitate violence and presumably other acts they see portrayed on television. Apparently, these children in seeing acts on television that are new or untypical of them become better able or more likely to perform them at a later time. The notion that they can be thought of as adding these acts to their repetoire of possible behavior is supported by the finding that children who do not voluntarily imitate portrayed behavior can do so when asked. The theory that has been developed to explain this phenomenon is called "observational learning theory," and it holds that persons can learn or become more proficient at performing acts simply by observing them either in real life or in a movie or on television.[28] Actual performance, of course, is contingent on a variety of circumstances, including

aspects of what is observed and the environment in which the viewer later finds himself. We do not know from scientific research whether older persons will imitate or acquire new capability to perform relatively novel sequences of behavior from television or films, but our observation of the world leads us to believe that certain singularly dramatic productions may lead presumably unstable persons to emulate them in real life. The best known example is the tendency for airline bomb threats to follow broadcasts of the Rod Serling play Doomsday Flight.[29]

This leads to the most fascinating but unanswered question of all. The temptation to dismiss the shaping of behavior as confined to children should be tempered by the common sense recognition that seeing someone do something about which we are unfamiliar or unsure makes it easier for us to do the same. The open question then is whether the Doomsday Flight effect and imitation by young children represent a discontinuity, or might there be a continuity across the full range of ages and psychological states in drawing on the media for behavior only so far apparent at the extremes of adult instability and childhood?

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