



**THE EFFECTS OF WATCHING VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA:
POLICY, CONSENSUS, AND CENSORSHIP**

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Violence can be watched in many ways: on TV, on the Cinema screen, on Video, on the Internet and in other forms. To take TV as an example, more than 40 years ago in 1954, a United States Senate (Judiciary) Committee held a series of hearings into the impact of television programs on juvenile crime (see Huston et al., 1992). And this was at a time in the United States when only one person in ten owned a television set. One might well ask what is the state of the debate in 1997, when according to a recent survey (Mediascope, 1996), 54% of American children have separate television sets in their bedrooms? Watching violence is now heavily a part of how the media entertains.

As a psychologist, former film critic and past Chair of the Commonwealth Films Board of Review, I have been very much aware of the stages of the debate: the frustration of the research enterprise and the non-causal effects that exist for investigators to interpret; the complexities of making those interpretations fit multiple, interacting influences; and the passions and vested interests of the debaters themselves.

A veritable wealth of experimental evidence has now been amassed and analysed on the issue of exposure to violence (e.g., Comstock & Paik, 1991; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Lowry, Sleet, Duncan & Powell, 1995). At last, possibly in the face of the detail of the research that has been completed and with the media's influence -and with violence increasing rather than decreasing over time - we appear to have some consensus in the debate. The evidence, I believe, is showing some fit with policy. Twelve Australian government reports (e.g., Brown, 1966; NH&MRC, 1996; Sanson, 1996), some of which I will report on here, have been submitted since 1987 concerned with violence and the media. The occurrence of the Port Arthur massacre brought the point compellingly home to the Australian people. This country now has an urgent need to explore what are the real issues about aggression, to try and identify the present focuses of national concern, and to work out what it might be facing in the future.

This paper looks first at the principles and assumptions underlying the Australian classification code, the effects those guidelines imply, and what is contained in the current experimental literature that might match them.

In the general debate about censorship, one cannot ignore the fact that a strong connection exists between law and morality. The guidelines for censorship basically try to facilitate the guarantee of an ordered, regulated, and lawful society.

The Australian Classification Code and its Principles

The classification code is widely and effectively disseminated. Starting at a local level, and browsing in one's local library one can easily find the booklet entitled "Censorship Classifications: A question and answer guide for parents" (Queensland Government Department of Justice, 1997). Here, classifications and their symbols are set out and described, not only for films and videos but also for printed matter and computer games. The message is simple: Australia has a classification system in place, there are definite ways of accessing it, and there are various agencies who are responsible for monitoring the system and providing information about it.

Out of the local library and into the familiar world of media control, the simplicity of regulation evades us. Industry does not take great care in warning film-goers about the

violence they will see, aggressive videos find their way easily to children who shouldn't see them, and television is the instant entertainer for many tired and frustrated people.

A constant question is "how our classification system holds up against growing public concern about portrayals of violence in the media?" It was with such questions in mind that Government recently established community discussion groups to reflect upon and discuss the practice and implementation of classification guidelines.

When one examines the code underlying the classification system in Australia and other countries, one is necessarily confronted with statements of fundamental Rights and Responsibilities. Adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want to. Yet minors (and perhaps others) should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them. Everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive. And there is a need to take account of community concerns about depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly when it is sexual in kind, and portrays persons in a demeaning manner. The Code is determined under the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 (the Classification Act) - see OFLC, 1996. Table 1 highlights the major principles for discussion.

Table 1

Key Principles of the Australian Classification Code

- Adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want
- Minors should be protected from material likely to harm or disturb them
- Everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive
- There is a need to take account of community concerns about depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual, and about the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner

Note.- Taken from "Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Videotapes," published by the Office of Film and Literature Classification, July, 1966.

Let us take each of these principles in turn. Some are philosophical in their outreach; most have a moral character to them; and others relate more simply to effects that are potentially observable.

The philosophical and moral principle of Liberty was articulated by John Stuart Mill in his famous dictum:

"The only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilised community against his will is to prevent harm to others. His own good either physical or moral is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better from him to do so, because it will make him happier, because in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise or even right" (see Mill in Gray & Smith, 1991, p. 30).

It is consistent with John Stuart Mill's dictum to assert that the coercion of laws, or their encroachment on what we see as our personal liberty, is justified by the fact that many of our laws protect us from harm. While censorship restricts our personal and private behaviour, we need to explore closely whether the rationale based on "harm" fits its application.

The notion of protection from harm is linked directly to the issue of what negative effects can be observed from viewing violence. This matter is related integrally to the task of rationalising the act of censorship which to some illustrates the law encroaching too deeply into our lives (Sheehan, 1998). Time has put the law of censorship on the defensive about its goal of protecting members of Society from harm and the public from being offended. The underlying assumption of the Code, however, is that we must preserve the structure of a well ordered, moral (Christian) society, and the definition of what kind of society that is, especially in a pluralistic, multicultural environment such as Australia's has blurred considerably. In the censorship debate, one has to realise how much values and attitudes determine the direction of the debate. It is true that laws by their very nature fail to do justice to individual differences in attitudes and behaviour, and the same law may encroach on one person, but not another, particularly so because we are for the most part placed in quite different circumstances in society. The essential point is that there are laws that do encroach, but must be tolerated for the "common good." Laws can and do provide a degree of structure that seems necessary at times (see Sheehan, 1998); and two key points in judging that necessity are: firstly, that moral consciousness underlies the law, and secondly that psychological effects exist which are related to it and which are potentially observable.

Let us now go to that literature to canvass broadly the effects that have been observed.

Observed Effects

There are many ways of looking at the relationship between filmed violence and those who view it. Research highlights, for example, the meaningfulness of addressing the effects of viewing violence and substantial exposure to it (see Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988) - the intensity of the act of watching is a key issue for those concerned with the judgement of what is offensive or unacceptable to the general community. A further emphasis is on people's perceptions of the effects of violence they see on the screen, perceptions which may or may not be related to actual effects. These perceptions were a major issue, for example, in the National Inquiry into violence conducted in the late 1980s by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT; 1990). A further focus has been the examination of the needs associated with viewing violence; this draws important attention to what motives are satisfied by the act of watching violence and, by implication, to the potential manipulation of those needs by the industry for profit.

Research Links to Principles

When one reviews the psychological research, particularly the sets of data that are taken to have policy implications, much of the literature and policy dealing with filmed violence reflects the assumption that certain viewers are more vulnerable than others to the negative effects of watching the violence. This is a key assumption of the Code itself and well supported in the experimental literature. Taking television as an example, work by Leonard Eron and his associates (see Huesmann & Eron, 1986), highlights the important concept of a period of sensitive development in children. Their contention is that in this critical period, the frequency of viewing images of aggression can lead to actual aggressive behaviour. Eron and his associates found effects were largely aggregated at the 9-12 age level. Support consistent with the onset of a vulnerable age also lies in the detailed work of Knowles and Nixon (1989, 1990) with children between the ages of 6 and 13 years. Their studies tracked the development in understanding of basic emotional expressions of screen characters by the children. The development occurred usually between 6 and 9 years with a ceiling for correct recognition at around 9 years. In terms of perceptions, the National Inquiry conducted by the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (1990) further reinforced the vulnerability of this age group to the media's possible negative effects. It is well to keep in mind, in relation to perceived needs, that the film industry targets heavily both the attention and finances of the adolescent community.

The question of the young being more vulnerable to the media's effect is a complex and difficult one to interpret precisely. One can only really address the issue by attempting to understand the operation of multiple variables, or factors, that may play a part. Variables highlighted by the literature target such factors as the capacity to differentiate screened fantasy from reality (see Feshbach, 1972; Sheehan, 1983), degree of justification for the aggression shown (see Berkowitz, 1986; Huesmann & Eron, 1986), the identification of the viewer with the violent events being displayed (see Duck, 1990; Huesmann, 1986; Noble, 1971), and how much viewers attend to, comprehend and cognitively process the meaning of the violence they view (ABT, 1990; Fernie, 1981; Knowles & Nixon, 1989, 1990).

Reading through the titles of recent research work it is not easy, at first glance, to categorise their exact content. For example, a title like "how the media affects your child's and adolescents' development" relates to both the exposure of harmful and disturbing scenes to children, as well as to the occurrence of social learning and attitude formation among adolescents.

Despite such difficulties of categorising, a search among the recent literature gives us an instructive indication of the range and frequency of current concerns. Table 2 highlights the scope and reveals where the contemporary emphases lie.

A major theme of many of the current research articles is "children's development." What is at stake, here, is children's emotional development, their understanding of the world around them, their security when reality and fantasy cannot be distinguished, their identification with powerful characters, and their creative fantasy development through daydreaming and playing. This focus fits well with the key principle underlying the Code of "Minors being protected from material likely to harm or disturb them."

There is an increasing number of papers on the labelling of films, videos and television programs. In the United States there are problems with certain kinds of warning labels using ages and not describing the contents adequately. One is reminded of the study of our own classification system in Australia (Paterson & Hellmers, 1993) where valuable feedback (89% of the people surveyed) suggested that we need more detailed consumer advice and better information about the meanings of the classification categories (such as AO). Such studies appear to fall naturally into the classification-system debate which focuses on government's attempt to "protect from exposure to unsolicited material that is found offensive."

A large number of studies tackle various aspects of the intransigent problems of adolescence, aggression and violence. No one trivialises the extent and multifactorial nature of what is studied and the impact of effects of other social issues, of which media violence is only one. However, as a source of social learning scripts, as a source of "heroes" of dubious problem-solving ability, and as purveyors of justifications for violent actions, television, films and videos commonly communicate particular anti-social attitudes such as instant gratification (as opposed to delayed reward). The literature abounds with concerns which cannot be ignored about the influence of viewed sexual violence on what the popular culture thinks and might do. In so far as the learning of social attitudes and ways of coping with interpersonal issues clearly relate to community worry about depictions condoning or inciting violence (particular sexual), there is clear support for the fourth key principle in the classification code.

Table 2

Themes of Research Linking to Key Principles Underlying Classification Code

Minors should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material likely to harm or disturb them - CHILD DEVELOPMENT

- Effects of the "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" on Children's aggression with peers (Boyatzis, Matillo & Nesbitt, 1995)
- Children's fright reactions to television news (Cantor & Nathanson, 1996)
- Sex differences in the use of science and technology in children's cartoons (Durham & Brownlow, 1996)
- Television and aggression: Recent developments in research and theory (Geen, 1994)
- Children's wishful identification and parasocial interaction with favorite television characters (Hoffner, 1996)
- Children's toleration of real life aggression after exposure to media violence (Molitor & Hirsch, 1994)
- Video violence and the protection of children (Newson, 1994)
- The influence of television on children's daydreaming styles (Valkenburg & van der Voort, 1995)
- Television's impact on fantasy play: A review of research (van der Voort, 1994)

Everyone should be protected from exposure to unsolicited material that they find offensive - CLASSIFICATION SYSTEMS

- Forbidden fruit versus tainted fruit: Effects of warning labels on attraction to television violence (Bushman & Stack, 1996)
- Classification Issues: Film, video and television (Paterson & Hellmers, 1993)

There is a need to take account of community concerns about depictions that condone or incite violence, particularly sexual, and about the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner - ADOLESCENT SOCIAL ATTITUDES AND LEARNING.

- Violence and media reports: A connection with Hungerford? (Cantor & Sheehan, 1997)
- Viewing violence: How the media affect your child's and adolescent's development (Levine & Bruckman, 1996)
- Violent methods associated with high suicide mortality among the young (Ohberg, Lonnqvist, Sarna & Vuroi, 1996)
- Pervasive media violence (Schooler & Flora, 1996)
- Movie portrayals of juvenile delinquency (Snyder, 1995)
- School students' responses to television portrayals of institutionalised violence (Tulloch, 1995)

There are other categories in the debate, however, that are also important. These are highlighted in the next table.

Table 3

Themes of Research Related to Principles but not Underlying Them

GROUPS AT RISK

- Adolescents at risk for violence (Lowry, Sleet, Duncan & Powell, 1995)
- Factors in childhood that predict later criminal behaviour (Viemero, 1996)
- Television violence and behaviour: The effects of television violence on children (Crump, 1995)

EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTIONS

- Violence among children and adolescents and the role of the paediatrician (Dukarm & Holl, 1995)
- TV violence: Myth and reality (Hepburn, 1995)
- Television violence: Implications for violence prevention (Hughes & Hasbrouck, 1996)
- Short term effectiveness of anticipatory guidance to reduce early childhood risks for subsequent violence (Sege et al., 1997)

POLICY

- The portrayal of violence in the media: Impacts and implications for policy (Brown, 1996)
- Why parents hate TV (Lieberman, 1996)
- Considering policies to protect children from TV violence (Potter & Warren, 1996)
- Key findings and recommendations (National Television Violence Study)
- Understanding and preventing aggressive responses in youth (Studer, 1996)
- Report to the Minister for Health and Family Services on the impact of media violence in Australia ((National Health & Medical Research Council, 1996)

CONTEXT OF VIOLENCE

- National Television Violence Study: Scientific papers and Executive summary (Mediascope, 1995, 1996)
- Measuring television violence: The importance of context (Kunkel, Wilson, Donnerstein & Blumenthal, 1995)

EFFECTS OF VIDEO-GAMES

- Australian perceptions of films, videos and computer games (OFLC, 1994)
- Video and computer games: Effect on children and implications for health education (Dorman, 1997)
- Computer games and their effects on young people: A review (Durkin, 1995)
- Playing violent video and computer games and adolescent self concept (Funk & Buchman, 1996)
- Cognitive tempo, violent video games, and aggressive behaviour in young boys (Irwin & Gross, 1995)

Research in Related (but Distinct) Categories

Turning now to themes which are not directly related to the key principles of the classification code, there are five main categories which can be discerned. These relate (as illustrated in Table 3) to characteristics of at-risk groups, educational interventions, policy matters, the importance of the context of the violence to its effects, and the possible effects of violent video-games.

There is a subtle distinction between the groups at risk and the studies of young males going through so-called "normal" adolescence. The distinction I should like to make is that the latter group is a large one, and at a certain sensitive point in development. There is an amount of confusion of role and identity associated with normal adolescence. The groups at risk in this category contains individuals with particular tendencies to be attracted to impulsiveness, conduct-disorders, and violent behaviour. Violence on the screen seems to have a particular attraction for such individuals: they seek it, and it influences them. The effects appear from the literature to be mutually reinforcing: the more the individual watches violence, the more he (such people are most frequently male) is aggressive, and the more attracted he is to aggressive and violent films or programs. Another group of individuals-at-risk appears to be the more social withdrawn, isolated people; and once again, this group consists typically of young men. The media unfortunately focus hugely on the less secure, the more isolated, and the less achieving young males. The possible implication of the media in the process of mass killings (Cantor & Sheehan, 1997) presents us with questions with no ready answers as to how to identify and help people on the brink of major aggressive acts - a particular challenge to anyone researching in the areas of dysfunctional adolescent development, and one critically affecting national preventive policy.

Educational interventions and policy issues present together as a large area of research and future interest. Considering why this might be so, particularly in the last few years, one is drawn to the conclusion that the debate over media violence has taken something of a new direction. The majority of critics of the harmful effects of media violence in the past have been people who were unconvinced about its importance in the overall context of violence in our society. I suspect that the tide has turned in that respect in Australian Society. There have always been those who are particularly worried about the censorship implications of acknowledging undue media influence. Now that there has been a shift away from the need to convince people of these effects, there is currently more of a concentration on how to protect people. It is not surprising therefore that the number of papers related directly to classification principles has increased.

The definition of violence is becoming more sophisticated and has clarified the debate. Work in progress by Eron and his associates looks interestingly at the consequences of the fall-off in aggression among aging adults who were themselves avid watchers of filmed violence. Aggression concepts have the propensity for being used in informative material for parents and those with duties of care for children and adolescents, reflecting more sensitively the "dimensions" outlined by Paik and Comstock (1994) and followed up in a landmark piece of United States research (The National Television Violence Study, 1996). The principle of powerful learning "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand" underscores the uneasiness many people currently feel about media violence and sophistication about the issues is increasing.

Responses by Professional Agencies

I want to turn now to what major agencies reporting about media violence seem to be concluding. In particular, I want to look at a series of recent submissions, following the Port Arthur massacre, made to Government on media portrayals of violence. The debate and suggestions for action have widened to include a host of concerns other than proving that effects exists, censorship and regulation of the industry. New emphases are emerging on strategies to counteract and minimise the negative effects of media violence - on education rather than regulation.

The Agencies I particularly want to canvass are The Australian Psychological Society (Sansom, 1996), the National Health and Medical Research Council (NH&MRC, 1996), and the Australian Institute of Criminology (Brown, 1996). All of them show an interesting degree of similarity in their analyses.

<p>Table 4 Portrayals of Media Violence: 1996 Reviews from Professionals in Psychology, Criminology, and Health & Family Services</p>

Common Concerns

- Acceptance of violence in society
- Desensitising responses to viewed violence
- Justification of personal violence
- Use of violence to solve problems

Other Areas of Concern

- Censorship and regulation
- Parental influence
- Promoting the individual as an active responsible agent in need of reliable information
- Self-regulation of people involved in the media
- Research needs

There are wide-ranging recommendations contained in these agencies' reports. The point for noting for our purposes, lies not in their actual detail, but in the consensus about general principles, areas of concern and assumptions. In short, the pervasive, influential nature of violence in the media is not really questioned. Rather, the importance of counteracting the negative long-term effects on attitudes is seen as the main concern. Negative attitudes are identified (see Table 4) as: the acceptance of violence in society; the desensitising of people to seeing violence without feeling empathy or outrage; the justification of violence; and the use of violence to "solve" problems. Countering these attitudes, the submissions importantly contain ideas for improving the operation of the country's classification system. They support parental education leading to critical, controlled viewing by children; they promote the viewer as a responsible agent who may be able to be "immunised" against the negative effects of viewing violence; and they

include many creative ideas concerning self-regulation of the people involved in the media - from the actors and directors to the program writers and content choosers. In the submissions, also, several research needs in specific areas were suggested. There were, for example, a number of recommendations for educational programs in both primary and secondary schools.

In the focus on education rather than regulation, adult education was uniformly seen by the professions as a means of raising awareness of issues. This can be done by disseminating facts, providing promotion campaigns for healthy viewing, and looking at interventions through discussion and debate as a way of countering negative attitudes produced by viewing high levels of violence. The process inevitably requires both institutional and government support.

Conclusion

There seems to be emerging something of a convergence between policy, research effects, and the act of censoring. The issue of Liberty will continue to be debated in the to-and-fro of philosophical (and moral) discussion, but negative effects clearly exist. Existing policy makes assumptions that are somewhat in tune with these, and agencies responsible for communicating about media violence are in reasonable agreement about them.

There seems to have been an important shift away from querying the effects of media violence towards counteracting the effects which have been found. I am not separating myself from the observation, however, that this trend may, in part, be sociologically determined. Emotional events in our environment help to shape our attitudes and inevitably help to determine policy, suggesting an affective component in the policy formation process.

The advent of videos and the Internet, coupled with the research into the effect of context, and parental influence on subsequent outcomes, has necessitated the move of censorship into the realms of personal responsibility, in particular parental responsibility. All three professional reports and my categorising of the recent literature detects this shift, and there is a recognised need for parental involvement in children's "media exposure." Parents need to be well informed and aware of the possible harmful effects on their children's behaviour and attitudes, as well as how to encourage children's development of skills to counteract the negative influence of the violence they see on the media.

Not only parent, but adults with responsibilities for programming, acting, producing, or even funding programs with potentially harmful effects are called upon to exercise their influence on the excesses of the market. Institutions and government are essential for the ultimate success of any successful social campaign.

With more of a focus on education, it will be intriguing to see how institutions and government will respond when the basic right expressed so well in the classification code is presented as the other side of the coin of responsibility to those who need education and information in order to perform their "duty of care" to those who are in their charge.

In Australia, as in the rest of the western countries, we do not as a society burn books; we do not invite policy makers to block out the screens of television sets or cinemas. One of

our most dearly held views is that for a healthy society, to the greatest extent possible, people should have freedom of speech and access to whatever they want to read, hear or see. Hence there is a need to do uphill battle with some of the points of the Code. The Individual's Right as expressed in the first principle of the classification code is balanced by the Duties of Care of the other three principles (see Table 1). But, as I have already argued, the burden is probably too great for the majority of individuals to bear without some support. Therein lies the crux of the censorship debate.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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