TV and Film Violence

By the time the average U.S. child starts elementary school he or she will have seen 8,000 murders and 100,00 acts of violence on TV.

Does the violence in films and on TV contribute to violence in society?

This question has been debated for decades. During that time some 2,500 books and articles have been written on the effects of TV and film violence on human behavior.

In this article we're going to summarize some the latest thinking on this subject.

The results of one of the most extensive studies ever done on the subject of violence and TV were released in 2003.

Researchers followed 329 subjects over 15 years. They found that those who as children were exposed to violent TV shows were much more likely to later be convicted of crime. Researchers said that, "Media violence can affect any child from any family," regardless of social class or parenting.

Girls who watched more than an average amount of violence tended to throw things at their husbands. Boys who grew up watching violent TV shows were more likely to be violent with their wives.

Researchers concluded in Developmental Psychology that, "Every violent TV show increases a little-bit the likelihood of a child growing up to behave more aggressively."

We'll look at more of the research in a moment.

Canada was one of the first countries to extensively research this issue. The results of their studies prompted some of their engineers to devise the "V-Chip." As you may know, the V-Chip allows parents to lock out TV programming they consider objectionable to their children.

Although the concern in Canada was primarily violence (hence the V-chip), in the United States there is also great concern about sexual content -- probably more than in most other industrialized societies. Hence, the V-chip can be programmed to screen out both violence and sex.

The issue of sex, which has resulted in quite different research findings, is discussed here and here, so in this article we'll focus on the issue of film and TV violence.

Because ours is a puritanically-based society and we have problems with depictions of sex, we tend to eroticize violence.

For many people this creates an unfortunate, often even unconscious, link between sex and violence.

from "Sex Research, Censorship, and the Law"

Cause-Effect Proof

A number of studies done in the United States and Canada have shown a positive relationship between early exposure to TV violence and physical aggressiveness in later life.

Even so, a clear cause-effect relationship is complicated by the fact that children are typically exposed to many stimuli as they grow up, many of which could play a role in later behavior.

For example, during a child's life we can't discount the role of such things as violent video games, the social values of parents and peers, or general living conditions.

If you eat something that you have not tried before and immediately get sick, you will probably assume there's a direct relationship between the two.

And if at some later date you forget about your first experience and eat the same thing again, and immediately get sick again, you can be fairly sure that whatever you ate makes you sick.

No rocket science here, just clear cause and effect.

Unfortunately, the cause and effect in many other areas of life are not as readily apparent.

A few decades ago you would see doctors in TV commercials endorsing a particular brand of cigarettes. And many medical doctors smoked.

Not today.

Today the evidence is clear: smoking is the number one cause of preventable heath problems and premature death in the United States. Although for years the cigarette manufacturers suppressed evidence that linked smoking to health problems, eventually the cause-effect relationship became obvious to anyone who wanted investigate the facts.

Unlike the cause and effect in the example of your eating something and immediately getting sick, the effects of cigarette smoking aren't immediately apparent. It's only

years later that many smokers develop lung cancer, heart problems, emphysema, sexual problems, etc.

In the same way-after looking at years of accumulated data-we're now recognizing a relationship between violence in the media and social problems. A summary of much of the research and its consequences can be found in the book, Visual Intelligence-Perception, Image, and Manipulation in Visual Communication, by Ann Marie Seward Barry.

The results of a study released in March, 2002 that tracked 700 male and female youths over a seventeen-year period showed a definite relationship between TV viewing habits and acts of aggression and crime in the later life.

All other possible contributing environmental elements, such as poverty, living in a violent neighborhood, and neglect, were factored out of this study.

According to one of the authors of the study, the findings help cement the link between TV and violence. The study is detailed in Science.

The Effects of TV and Film Violence

There are many problems in linking media violence to violence in society. First, as we've suggested, only a small percent of those who watch violence are responsible for violent acts.

Most of us are seemingly unaffected by it.

Even though we can't establish a simple, direct, cause-and-effect relationship between media violence and violence in our society, we can draw some conclusions from the data.

Studies show that people who watch a lot of TV violence not only behave more aggressively, but are more prone to hold attitudes that favor violence and aggression as a way of solving conflicts. These viewers also tend to be less trusting of people and more prone to see the world as a hostile place.

 An extensive study in five Massachusetts communities found a relationship between viewing media violence and the acceptance of sexual assault, social violence, and even alcohol use.

Studies also show that media violence also has a desensitizing effect on viewers.

As a result, specific levels of violence become more acceptable over time. It then takes more and more graphic violence to shock (and hold) an audience.

History gives us many examples. To cite just one, the famous Roman Circuses started out being a rather tame form of entertainment. But in an effort to excite audiences, violence and rape were introduced in the arena settings. Subsequently, as audiences got used to seeing these things, they then demanded more and more, until the circuses eventually became violent, bloody and grotesque, and hundreds, if not thousands, of hapless people died in the process of providing "entertainment."

Next, media violence is typically unrealistic, simplistic, glorified, and even presented as humorous

 The "bang, bang, you're dead" sanitized scenario that we so often see on TV or in films communicates nothing of the reality of death or dying.

It is only when we see death firsthand or have a loved one killed that we realize that death in film or on TV bears little resemblance to what we experience in real life.

. Even the sound of gunshots on TV and in films is so different from real gunshots that people often fail to recognize them in real life.

Next, the consequences of killing, especially by the "good guys," are seldom shown. Violence and killing are commonly depicted as a ready and even acceptable solution to problems. To put it simplistically, problems are solved when the "bad guys" are all dead.

The unrealistic element of TV and film violence seems to come as a surprise to some. A young gang member who was admitted to a New York ER after being shot seemed amazed to find that getting shot was not only traumatic but excruciatingly painful. He was blaming the doctors and nurses for his pain, since on TV getting shot didn't seem to be all that big of a deal.

Summary and Conclusions

We have clear indications that the long-term effects of exposure to media violence will lead to undesirable social consequences. These negative social effects will undoubtedly be accelerated as violence becomes more graphic in an effort to attract and hold film and TV audiences.

In looking over the evidence of the increasing levels of film and TV violence it is now taking to satisfy viewers and the resulting effects on society, David Puttnam, a noted film director, simply observed, "We are destroying ourselves."

TV producers clearly face a dilemma in dealing with the apparent conflict between the negative effects of TV violence and positive program ratings.

So what's the answer?

First, we have to take a look at how violence is used. Eliminating all violence from the media is not in keeping with the reality of the human condition. Violence has always been with us and probably always will be.

But the 32,000 murders and 40,000 attempted murders witnessed by normal TV viewers over 18 years is clearly unrealistic and exploitative.

Violence is being used as a superficial way of grabbing and holding an audience.

Many TV and film producers have elected to "take a higher road" and not rely on gratuitous violence to capture and hold an audience. This route typically results in more accolades for their work and more personal respect from the creative community.

But the higher road is often the more difficult one. It takes talent to engage an audience through the strength of your storytelling and production expertise.

Since the commercial aspect of this topic is important, it may be significant that a well documented study by the American Psychological Association shows that commercials in violent TV shows are not as effective in selling products as commercials in other types of TV programming.