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# The Verdict On Media Violence: It's Ugly ... And Getting Uglier

*Daphne Lavers*

More than five decades after television's advent, its early promise "has been erased by the rapid degeneration of televised programming content," according to the Los Angeles-based Parents Television Council (PTC), which lobbies for more wholesome family TV fare.

The PTC recently quantified the general sense that television and film have increased the "raunch factor" in a study of the 2000-01 TV season titled *The Sour Family Hour*. The report showed "huge increases in coarse language," up 78 percent compared with the last study in 1998-99. (It equated coarse language with "verbal violence," seeing it as the starting point of the violence continuum.) TV violence was up a whopping 70 percent in the two years since the previous study. The sexual content fell into subcategories—including homosexuality, oral sex, pornography, masturbation and "kinky" practices such as phone sex, group sex and bondage—"covering topics which a generation ago would seldom have seen the light of day in 10 p.m. programming, let alone 8 p.m. fare."

Upset, the PTC wrote an open letter to the heads of the major TV networks asking for the reinstatement of the "family hour" between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. The organization also launched a campaign to "publicly shame those advertisers who market and sponsor the violence, sexual raunch and vulgarity to our nation's children," says L. Brent Bozell, PTC president. "We will name names, and often. It saddens and frustrates me to no end that it has gotten to this point—publicly shaming adults for marketing trash to 10 million children every night."

But in many families, media have replaced teachers and parents as educators, role models and the primary sources of information about the world, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). Children between 2 and 18 years of age spend six-and-a-half to eight hours a day with media, including television, videotapes, movies and video games—more time than on any other activity except sleeping, the AAP has found. By age 18, the average young person has seen 200,000 acts of violence on television alone.

The AAP also notes that, of 10,000 hours of broadcast programming reviewed by the National Television Violence Study, 61 percent portrayed interpersonal violence, much of it in an entertaining or glamorized manner. The highest proportion of violence was in children's programs: Of all animated films produced in the United States between 1937 and 1999, 100 percent portrayed violence.

Pushing such "trash" on children was the focus of a Federal Trade Commission (FTC) report in 2000 entitled *Marketing Violent Entertainment to Children: A Review of Self-Regulation and Industry Practices in the Motion Picture, Music Recording and Electronic Game Industries*. Prompted by the Columbine High School massacre, it found that the entertainment industries routinely and illegitimately target-marketed violent entertainment directly to adolescents and preadolescents and then denied doing so. In April 2001, the FTC reported some improvement in the movie and video-game industries, notably in limiting advertising to teens and in providing "rating information."

"Every year, the media use ever-greater quantities of violence to hook their audience," says Dave Grossman, a psychologist and media researcher. "Why did the alcohol and tobacco industries want so desperately to continue to sell their products to children? Because the addictive process is so much more powerful if they can start when they're children."

Grossman, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel who studied and taught at West Point, researched how to overcome natural and instinctive barriers to killing, a task essential for the armed forces. He found that the psychological tools of repetition, desensitization and escalation, combined with the instinct for survival, all contribute to a soldier's—or a child's—capacity for violence.

Repetition is a psychological technique to reduce or eliminate phobias by increasing exposure, which increases tolerance levels—the same paradigm as addiction. The practice also is the foundation of the advertising industry: More "exposures" equal more familiarity and increased comfort levels. Repetition of violence does the same through the process of desensitization.

Over time, the phobic response against violence becomes less and less intense, according to Joanne Cantor, professor of communications at the University of Wisconsin. "Exposure to media violence, particularly that which entails bitter hostilities or the graphic display of injuries, initially induces an intense emotional reaction in viewers," Cantor told the American Psychological Association in an August 2000 speech. Over time and with repeated exposure, however, many viewers exhibit decreasing emotional responses to the depiction of violence and injury."

That decreasing response necessitates an escalation of video violence—increasing the dose, as it were—to maintain a reaction. "People get jaded very quickly," says Neal Gabler, senior fellow at the Lear Center, a project of the University of

Southern California's Annenberg School of Communication. "I compare popular culture to a drug. In popular culture, there is always a ratcheting mechanism. Once you've had this experience, this sensation, you want more; once you've had that, you reach a plateau and you want more."

Once desensitization has begun, whether in viewers, addicts or soldiers, conditioning—both operant and classical—reinforces that learned behavior. "Operant conditioning teaches you to kill, but classical conditioning is a subtle but powerful mechanism that teaches you to like it," says Grossman.

Operant conditioning is the powerful, repetitive, stimulus-response training mechanism by which reactions are trained into automatic response, such as a police officer on a firing range or a pilot in a flight simulator. Video games, some based on movies and TV series, program exactly the same automatic, conditioned response and increasing skill level in children, often in marksmanship. In fact, law-enforcement agencies use the Firearms Training Simulator, more or less identical to the ultraviolent video game "Time Crisis", notes Toronto media activist Valerie Smith in her Media Violence 101 primer. The U.S. Army trains with the Multipurpose Arcade Combat Simulator, based on a modified Super Nintendo video game. Classical conditioning associates a stimulus with some pleasurable response, developed in the Pavlovian experiments with dogs in which food was associated with an audio cue. Television connects visual media-program content with advertising content.

"Our children watch vivid pictures of human suffering and death, and they learn to associate it with their favorite soft drink and candy bar or their girlfriend's perfume," says Grossman. "All the time in movie theaters when there is bloody violence, the young people laugh and cheer and keep right on eating popcorn and drinking soda. We have raised a generation of barbarians who have learned to associate violence with pleasure, like the Romans cheering and snacking as the Christians were slaughtered in the Coliseum."

The doubling of the murder rate following the introduction of television was discovered through an epidemiological study of murder by Brandon Centerwall, a professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington. "All Canadian and U.S. studies of the effect of prolonged childhood exposure to television (two years or more) demonstrate a positive relationship between earlier exposure and later physical aggressiveness," Centerwall wrote in the Journal of the American Medical Association. "The critical period of exposure to television is preadolescent childhood.... The aggression-enhancing effect of exposure to television is chronic, extending into later adolescence and adulthood."

The phenomenon of killers committing replica homicides learned through murderous teaching tools from movies and television has been linked to films such as Natural Born Killers, Reservoir Dogs, Child's Play 3 and The Basketball Diaries, as well as World Wrestling Federation TV broadcasts. The movie Scream, in which a slasher-murderer draped in black dons a mask inspired by Edvard Munch's painting The Scream con-

tinues to inspire replica murders both in North America and Europe. The same month that the AAP released its policy on media violence last year, a 24-year-old Belgian with no criminal record and no history of psychiatric problems dressed himself in a long black tunic, donned a Scream mask and stabbed a 15-year-old schoolgirl 30 times. He told police the murder was premeditated and motivated by the Scream trilogy.

While most film and TV people deny any responsibility for the increase in crime and violence, one exception is veteran film director Robert Altman, who blamed Hollywood for recent terrorism attacks. Altman, director of M\*A\*S\*H, told the BBC last October that violent action films with big explosions, usually targeted at young men, amount to training films. He observed that "nobody would have thought to commit an atrocity like that unless they'd seen it in a movie."

While young men are the target audience, young women are most often the victims, whether in TV series or serial-killer glorification movies. In her media-violence primer, activist Smith observed that "the most extreme form of film violence, the splatter or slasher genre, was launched in 1963." This form of entertainment features people, primarily teen-age girls and young women, being tortured, dismembered, disemboweled and beheaded with various construction tools: chain saws, tool guns, drills, jigsaws. The violence almost always takes place while the victims are naked or wearing skimpy lingerie.

Former FBI agent Robert Ressler and forensic psychiatrist Park Elliot Dietz, both experts on serial murder, believe these films have helped fuel the increase in serial killings because of the explicit linking of sex with torture and murder in films targeted at teen-age audiences. "If a mad scientist wanted to find a way to raise a generation of sexual sadists in America, he could hardly do better at our present state of knowledge than to try to expose a generation of teen-age boys to films showing women mutilated in the midst of a sexy scene," says Dietz.

Horror over television's content has prompted the creation of two technology fixes, the V-chip and CC+, both developed by Canadians for the North American market. The V-chip, widely available in new TV sets and some cable set-top boxes, combines hardware and software to block programming according to rating codes and content categories. Developed by Canadian engineering professor Tim Collings, the V-chip uses the controversial national ratings system for television and televised movie programs.

CC+ is a hardware and software technology that blocks swearwords. It was developed by Alberta forklift driver and mother of four Diane LaPierre, who was appalled when one of her sons began learning how to spell swearwords from the captions on PG-13 TV programs. CC+ works with the V-chip video technology, can be incorporated into new TV sets and also is available as a stand-alone black box.

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*Daphne Lavers is a Toronto-based free-lance journalist specializing in science, technology and broadcasting issues.*