

Violence in Media Entertainment

from the Media Awareness Network

Between 2000 B.C. and 44 A.D., the ancient Egyptians entertained themselves with plays re-enacting the murder of their god Osiris -- and the spectacle, history tells us, led to a number of copycat killings. The ancient Romans were given to lethal spectator sports as well, and in 380 B.C. Saint Augustine lamented that his society was addicted to gladiator games and "drunk with the fascination of bloodshed."



Violence has always played a role in entertainment. But there's a growing consensus that, in recent years, something about media violence has changed.

For one thing, there's more of it. Laval University professors Guy Paquette and Jacques de Guise studied six major Canadian television networks over a seven-year period, examining films, situation comedies, dramatic series, and children's programming (though not cartoons). The study found that between 1993 and 2001, incidents of physical violence increased by 378 per cent. TV shows in 2001 averaged 40 acts of violence per hour.

Francophone viewers experienced the greatest increase. Although physical violence on the three anglophone networks in the study increased by 183 per cent, on their francophone counterparts it increased by 540 per cent. One network, TQS, accounted for just under half (49 per cent) of all the physical violence on the networks studied.

Paquette and de Guise also identified a disturbing increase in psychological violence, especially in the last two years. The study found that incidents of psychological violence remained relatively stable from 1993 to 1999, but increased 325 per cent from 1999 to 2001. Such incidents now occur more frequently than physical violence on both francophone and anglophone networks.

Canadians are also heavily influenced by American programming. Paquette and de Guise found that over 80 per cent of the TV violence aired in Canada originates in the U.S. They speculate that francophone networks and stations may have a higher incidence of violence because they broadcast more movies, and this, in turn may be due to lower production budgets. Canadian-made violence is most likely to appear on private networks, which broadcast three times as many violent acts as public networks do. Overall, 87.9 per cent of all violent acts appear before 9 p.m., and 39 per cent air before 8 p.m. -- at a time when children are likely to be watching.

More Graphic, More Sexual, More Sadistic

Other research indicates that media violence has not just increased in quantity; it has also become much more graphic, much more sexual, and much more sadistic.

Explicit pictures of slow-motion bullets exploding from people's chests, and dead bodies surrounded by pools of blood, are now commonplace fare. Millions of viewers worldwide, many of them children, watch female World Wrestling Entertainment wrestlers try to tear out each other's hair and rip off each other's clothing. And one of the top-selling video games in the world, *Grand Theft Auto*, is programmed so players can beat prostitutes to death with baseball bats after having sex with them.

The Globalization of Media

Concerns about media violence have grown as television and movies have acquired a global audience. When UNESCO surveyed children in 23 countries around the world in 1998, it discovered that 91 per cent of children had a television in their home -- and not just in the U.S., Canada and Europe, but also in the Arab states, Latin America, Asia and

Africa. More than half (51 per cent) of boys living in war zones and high-crime areas chose action heroes as role models, ahead of any other images; and a remarkable 88 per cent of the children surveyed could identify the Arnold Schwarzenegger character from the film *Terminator*. UNESCO reported that the *Terminator* "seems to represent the characteristics that children think are necessary to cope with difficult situations."

Violence Without Consequences or Moral Judgment

The notion of violence as a means of problem solving is reinforced by entertainment in which both villains and heroes resort to violence on a continual basis. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), which has studied violence in television, movies and music videos for a decade, reports that nearly half of all violence is committed by the "good guys." Less than 10 per cent of the TV shows, movies and music videos that were analyzed contextualized the violence or explored its human consequences. The violence was simply presented as justifiable, natural and inevitable -- the most obvious way to solve the problem.

PG: Parental Guidance?

Busy parents who want to protect their children from media violence have a difficult task before them. The CMPA found that violence appears on all major television networks and cable stations, making it impossible for channel surfers to avoid it.

Nightly news coverage has become another concern. In spite of falling crime rates across North America, disturbing images of violent crime continue to dominate news broadcasting. As news shows compete with other media for audiences, many news producers have come to rely on the maxim: "If it bleeds, it leads." Violence and death, they say, keep the viewer numbers up. Good news doesn't.

As well, movie ratings are becoming less and less trustworthy in terms of giving parents real guidance on shows with unsuitable content. PG-13 movies tend to make more money than R-rated films, and as a result, the industry is experiencing a "ratings creep": shows that the Motion Picture Association of America would once have rated R are now being rated as PG-13, in order to increase box-office profits and rental sales.

In movie theatres, there is some control over who watches what. But at home, there's little to stop children from watching a restricted movie on one of the many emerging specialty channels. Kids may also have access to adult video games at the local video store. In December 2001, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission reported that retailers allowed 78 per cent of unaccompanied minors, ages 13 to 16, to purchase video games rated "mature."

To make supervision even more problematic, American children often have their own entertainment equipment. According to the Annenberg Public Policy Center, 57 per cent of kids aged 8 to 16 have TVs in their bedrooms, and 39 per cent have gaming equipment.

A Youth Subculture of Violence

While many parents are concerned about the graphic violence and put-down humour in many kids' shows, there's a growing subculture of violence that parental radar often misses.

Music and Music Videos

Music and music videos are pushing into new and increasingly violent territory. When singer Jordan Knight, formerly of the popular New Kids on the Block group, released a solo album in 1999, Canadian activists called for a boycott of the album because it included a song advocating date rape.

And when the controversial rap artist Eminem came to Toronto in 2000, politicians and activists unsuccessfully called for the government to bar him from the country, on the grounds that his violent lyrics promoted hatred against women. For instance, his song *Kim* graphically depicts him murdering his wife; and *Kill You* describes how he plans to rape and

murder his mother.

In spite of (or perhaps because of) his promotion of violence, Eminem continues to be a commercial success. His *Marshall Mathers* release sold 679,567 copies in Canada in 2000, and was the year's best-selling album. And *The Eminem Show* topped Canadian charts for months in 2002, selling, at one point, approximately 18,000 copies a week.

Eminem's success is not exceptional. Extremely violent lyrics have moved into the mainstream of the music industry. The Universal Music Group, the world's largest music company, lists Eminem, Dr Dre and Limp Bizkit all of whom have been criticized for their violent and misogynist lyrics among its top-grossing artists. And Madonna's 2002 music video *What It Feels Like For a Girl* contained such graphic violence that even MTV refused to air it more than once.

Video Games

Violence in general, and sexual violence in particular, is also a staple of the video game industry. The current trend is for players to be the bad guys, acting out criminal fantasies and earning points for attacking and killing innocent bystanders. Although these games are rated M, for mature audiences, it's common knowledge that they are popular among pre-teens and teenaged boys.

For example, players in *Grand Theft Auto 3* (the best-selling game ever for PlayStation 2) earn points by carjacking, and stealing drugs from street people and pushers. In *Carmageddon*, players are rewarded for mowing down pedestrians -- sounds of cracking bones add to the realistic effect. The first-person shooter in *Duke Nukem* hones his skills by using pornographic posters of women for target practice, and earns bonus points for shooting naked and bound prostitutes and strippers who beg, "Kill me." In the game *Postal*, players act out the part of the Postal Dude, who earns points by randomly shooting everyone who appears -- including people walking out of church, and members of a high school band. Postal Dude is programmed to say, "Only my gun understands me."

The level of violence in the gaming habits of young people is disturbingly high. In MNet's 2001 study *Young Canadians In A Wired World* (which found that 32 per cent of kids 9 to 17 are playing video games "every day or almost every day"), 60 per cent cited action/combat as their favourite genre. Stephen Kline of Simon Fraser University reported similar findings in his 1998 study of over 600 B.C. teens. Twenty-five per cent of the teens he surveyed played between seven and 30 hours a week and when asked for their one favourite game, their choice was "overwhelmingly" in the action/adventure genre.

Web Sites

Virtual violence is also readily available on the World Wide Web. Children and young people can download violent lyrics (including lyrics that have been censored from retail versions of songs), and visit Web sites that feature violent images and video clips. Much of the violence is also sexual in nature.

For example, the site Who Would You Kill? allows players to select real-life stars of television shows, and then describe how they would kill them off in the series. The entries frequently include bizarre acts of degradation and sexual violence. Murder is also a staple of the Web site newgrounds.com, which features a number of Flash movies showing celebrities being degraded and killed. When MNet surveyed 5,682 Canadian young people in 2001, the newgrounds site ranked twelfth in popularity among 11- and 12-year-old boys.

Other popular sites such as gorezone.com and rotten.com feature real-life pictures of accident scenes, torture and mutilation. In 2000, rotten.com was investigated by the FBI for posting photographs depicting cannibalism.

Many kids view these sites as the online equivalent of harmless horror movies. But their pervasive combination of violence and sexual imagery is disturbing. Gorezone's front-page disclaimer describes the images on its site as "sexually oriented and of an erotic nature" and then warns viewers that they also contain scenes of death, mutilation and dismemberment. The disclaimer then normalizes this activity by stating, "my interest in scenes of death,

horrifying photos and sexual matters, which is both healthy and normal, is generally shared by adults in my community."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that gore sites are well known to Canadian schoolchildren, although parents and teachers are often unaware of their existence. In MNet's 2001 survey, 70 per cent of high school boys said that they had visited such sites.

The presence of violence, degradation and cruelty in a range of media means that children are exposed to a continuum of violence, which ranges from the in-your-face attitude of shows like *South Park* to extreme depictions of misogyny and sadism. Young people generally take the lead when it comes to accessing new media but the MNet survey found that only 16 per cent of children say their parents know a great deal of what they do online. This is particularly problematic, given the results of a 1999 AOL survey which found online activities are emerging as a central facet of family life; and that a majority of parents believe that being online is better for their children than watching television.