

Entertaining Violence or Violent Entertainment? Mapping the Media Violence Controversy

The media violence controversy basically centers around the questions of effects: Does watching violent media make people more violent? Do violent video games make kids more likely to act aggressively, to hurt or kill others? Have violent movies and TV programs made our society a more violent place? Are recent school shootings the results of a lifetime of consuming violent images?

The two sides on this issue tend to be fairly clearly drawn. One group of thinkers – politicians, psychologists, physicians – strongly feel that common sense and psychological research support the belief that there’s a causal connection between violent entertainment and real violence. Experiencing violent media teaches kids violence. The critics of the “media effects” position suggest that viewers of violent entertainment are very aware that what they’re experiencing is “make-believe.” As a result, they are not nearly as affected by it as the “media effects” position suggests.

Within each position, though, there’s a certain amount of variation. The 2000 “Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children” can be viewed as a kind of “consensus” of the “media effects” position. It offers four conclusions based on “1000 studies” and “30 years of research” on the effects of violent entertainment. Craig Anderson, a University psychology professor, focuses on learning theory and “state-of-the-art” research to support his claim that there’s a clear and undeniable causal link between violence entertainment and aggression. Dave Grossman is also a psychology professor, but takes a more theoretical approach. He identifies four “psychological mechanisms” for training people to kill and shows how violent entertainment trains kids in a similar way.

On the other side, a number of writers are just as certain that the “effects” position is wrong. As a group, the opponents all tend to examine ways in which the “media effects” scholars ignore the “imaginary” or “entertainment” nature of media violence. Still, within this position, there’s even more variation. One common approach is to critically examine and refute the scholarship of the “media effects” position. Richard Rhodes does this in a *Rolling Stone* article on “The Media-Violence Myth.” In *Killing Monsters*, a 2002 book on why kids need “make-believe violence,” Gerard Jones tries to deepen the discussion by examining how children “use” violent entertainment to do emotional work in their lives. In a final approach, Maggie Cutler, a journalist for *The Nation*, similarly attempts to survey the controversy as a non-specialist and concludes that while violent media have an effect on kids, real world factors are more significant.

Violence is Violence: The Media Effects Position

The “Joint Statement on the Impact of Entertainment Violence on Children” represents the consensus statement of the American Medical Association and five other influential US medical associations.¹ As such, it is the central statement of the American public health community on the issue of the health risks of violent media. The statement acknowledges that there is still “a diversity of viewpoints,” but it feels that the approximately 1000 studies undertaken over the last 30 years permit the conclusion that “viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children.” One key aspect of this statement is that these increases are identified as significant and “long-lasting.” The Statement further identifies four specific ways that violent media can affect children: viewing violence can cause kids to see violence as an “effective way of resolving conflict,” it can lead to “emotional

¹ The American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association.

de-sensitization” towards violence, it can lead them to believe that the world is a “mean place,” and finally it “may lead to real life violence.” The Statement concludes by cautioning that they don’t consider media violence to be the only or the most important factor leading to youth violence and anti-social behavior. They acknowledge a number of other contributors. They do feel, though, that violent media is a clear contributor to these problems.

If the “Joint Statement” represents a consensus, Craig Anderson, an Iowa State University psychology professor, is one of the researchers who has helped to build this consensus. A specialist on human aggression and violence, he sends a clear message that violent media increases aggression and violence. In a 2000 presentation to the Senate Commerce Committee Hearing on “The Impact of Interactive Violence on Children,” Anderson lays out his position based on learning theory:

From infancy, humans learn how to perceive, interpret, judge, and respond to events in the physical and social environment. We learn by observing the world around us, and by acting on that world. We learn rules for how the social world works. ... Children who are exposed to a lot of violent media learn a number of lessons that change them into more aggressive people.

Another aspect of learning theory states that “repetition increases learning.” Thus, because we see violent images over and over on TV or because we play out violent scenes again and again in video games, we learn aggressive tendencies even more fully. Finally, in a section that will anticipate his critics, Anderson insists that the scholarship on this connection is rock solid. In this particular statement, Anderson doesn’t so much set forth his evidence for his claim as rely on his ethos – his credibility as a leading researcher in the field of media effects – to assure the Senate that this is the case.

Dave Grossman is also a University psychology professor, but he takes a very different approach to the question of how violent media effect us. Anderson treats human nature as a type of “blank slate”; any type of behavior can be taught and violent media teaches violence.

Grossman, on the other hand, uses history and natural science to argue that killing is unnatural, that a fundamental human inhibition that must be overridden before humans can be made to kill. In his “Teaching Kids to Kill,” he analyzes four psychological methods that are used to do this: “brutalization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and role-modeling.” According to Grossman, violent media can be seen to be “teaching violence” in all four of these ways. Grossman closes his article by suggesting three ways (education, legislation, and litigation) to begin to address the problem of violent media.

While Anderson and Grossman offer slightly different accounts of how violent media effect people, they both agree with the basic idea of the “Joint Statement”: watching violent media teaches people – and especially kids – to be violent.

“Get real”: Opposition to the “Media Effects” Position

In his critique of “The Media-Violence Myth,” Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Richard Rhodes contends that the claims of the “Joint Statement” are “baloney” and that the research simply doesn’t support the Joint Statement’s conclusions. Rhodes examines much of the research that the “media effects” position is based on and refutes them, study by study. For example, he looks at a key study that correlates increasing violence with increasing TV ownership in the US and Canada. Rhodes counters this claim with another study that shows that the correlation doesn’t hold in four other industrial democracies. Similarly, Rhodes discovers that a famous 22-year study “proving” that childhood interest in violent TV translated into adult violent behavior was based on the behavior of three men in the study:

As Huesmann [one of the researchers] himself acknowledged, "If just these three boys had behaved differently, all the significant results could have vanished." The dramatic bar graph Huesmann displayed for the Senate Judiciary Committee was simply a fraud.

Rhodes argues that much of the “media effects” position is based on flimsy scholarship like this.

In his book, *Killing Monsters*, Gerard Jones also spends a chapter critiquing the Joint Statement. More interestingly, though, his book focuses on how children use violent media “creatively” to do important emotional work:

I gathered hundreds of stories of young people who had benefited from super-hero comics, action movies, cartoons, shoot-'em-up video games, and angry rap and rock songs. I found stories of kids who'd used them badly, too, and others who'd needed adult help to use them well. But mostly I found young people using fantasies of combat in order to feel stronger, to access their emotions, to take control of their anxieties, to calm themselves down in the face of real violence, to fight their way through emotional challenges and lift themselves to new developmental levels. [6]

Jones cautions us against seeing kids as passive consumers, easily shaped and influenced by media. Rather they are active, aware users of these imaginative forms. Furthermore, through talking to kids about their engagement with violent media, Jones is convinced that children (like most of us) have a clear sense of the “fantasy” nature of the violence.

In an article for *The Nation*, Maggie Cutler also focuses on the difference between “fantasy” and “reality,” but whereas Jones is interested in the importance of imagination, Cutler is much more focused in the importance of reality. Unlike Rhodes, Cutler doesn't simply deny the possibility that violent media can affect kids negatively. Too much research suggests otherwise. Her final view, though, is that real factors in kids' lives are more important than media factors. “Real love, real money, real political events and real-life, unmediated interpersonal experience all shape kids' lives, minds and behavior more powerfully than any entertainment products.” Fighting in the schoolyard, for example, affects kids more than professional wrestling. If we really want to help kids, Cutler suggests, we should focus on real problems in their lives such as poverty, crime, neglect and abuse.

One way of looking at this controversy is to think about the emphasis each side gives to the term “violent entertainment.” The “media effects” position tends to emphasize violence. Even if it's entertaining, violence is still violence, and violence teaches violence. The opponents of that

position, however, tend to emphasize “entertainment.” Even if it’s violent, violent media is still primarily entertainment. It’s an imaginary, make-believe world that the viewers have considerable control over. The opponents of the “media effects” position caution against confusing the make-believe with the real.