復興崗學報
民 92，78 期 333-360

A Literature Review on the Portrayal of Television Violence* in the U.S. Programs and Its Impact on Viewers

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Abstract

The media effects literature has established a general consensus that television violence would have a negative impact on viewers. There are three primary types of effects out of exposure to television violence: learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors, desensitization to violence and the fear of being victimized by violence.

However, the risk of such effects occurring is influenced strongly by the contextual patterns in ways that violence is depicted. For example, rewarded violence increases the likelihood of learning of aggression, whereas punished violence decreases that risk.

By conducting the literature research, the writer of this article aims to explore the contextual features of violent portrayals, and the influence of these contextual features on viewers in terms of the three major negative effects.

Furthermore, by showing disturbing problems in the media nowadays--distorted representations of the real world as well as linking violence with pleasure, the writer also urges the media industry to face the problems and take its responsibility to correct the violent content on the screen, thereby decreasing the negative impact on the audience.

Key Words: contextual features, imitation effect, disinhibition effect, desensitization effect

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* In this article, television violence is referred to as all manner of violence, verbal and physical, which appears in all programming on the screen. It includes material broadcast over the air, distributed by cable and satellite systems, and available on videocassettes and disks.

Introduction

The only country in the world with nearly as much entertainment violence as that of the United States is Japan. Yet Japanese society is far less violent than American society. If media violence contributes to real-life violence, why isn't Japanese society more affected?

To answer this question, researchers did a study and found that although the amount of violence on Japanese television did not differ noticeably from that on American television, the nature of the portrayal of violence is different in Japan: the violence is more realistic and there is a greater emphasis on physical suffering, that is, the consequences of violence are emphasized (Iwao et al., 1981).

In Japan, the "bad guys" commit most of the violence, with the "good guys" suffering the consequences—the exact opposite of American programming. In this context, violence is seen as wrong, a villainous activity with real and painful consequences, rather than as justifiable.

Iwao (et al., 1981) thus concluded, " the net tone of Japanese programs is more that of a morality story than is the American. Bad assaulters initiate violence against good characters; good assaulters (though less often) initiate violence against bad characters. The most important violence that is experienced by major characters is something that arouses distress and sympathy, not something to be cheered."

However, in American media, the portrayal of violence as being justified (particularly by the "good guy") is the single most prevalent notion, thus casting the most powerfully reinforcing effect on viewers (Berkowitz & Rawlings, 1963; Comstock & Strasburger, 1993).

Iwao's research proves that different portrayals of violence will affect the extent of negative impact that violent acts in the media will have on viewers.

The result of Iwao's research was echoed by a statement of the Committee on Public Education of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). AAP issued a policy statement on the effects of media violence on children, indicating exposure to and the influence of media violence directly correlates to violent behavior. In addition, according to the AAP statement, the danger of media violence is the context in which the violence is portrayed.

How much violence is there on the screen and how is television violence

portrayed? How do the violent portrayals affect viewers? And what effects do the different contextual features of violent portrayals have on viewers? These questions are worth examining.

The quantity and context of television violence

Since the late 1960s, George Gerbner and his colleagues have conducted content analyses to assess the amount of television violence.

Defining television violence as "the overt expression of physical force (with or without a weapon) against self or other, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed, or actually hurting or killing," Gerbner and his colleagues constantly found that children's programs were more violent than prime-time programming, in their assessments of prime-time and weekend morning television.

On average, over 90% of children's programs contained violence, compared to 70% of prime-time shows. In addition, children's programming featured a higher rate of violent actions, with over 20 acts per hour versus about 5 per hour during prime time (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980; Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck, 1979).

Gerbner and Signorielli (1990) further tracked the level of violence during the 1987-1989 span. Although fluctuations existed in the level of violence during this period, viewers were consistently subjected to high levels of violence. Overall, the level of violence in prime-time programming averaged about five acts per hour, and children's Saturday morning programs averaged about 20-25 acts per hour. Violence was highest during the time when children were most likely to be watching.

Huston (et al., 1989) said that by the time a typical child leaves elementary school, he or she will have witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence (see Hughes & Hasbrouck, 1996).

Eron, in testimony to Congress in 1993, stated that these statistics are underestimates, because they do not take into account exposure to cable channels, increasingly present in homes and prone to air more violent programs than broadcast television. Additionally, children view R-rated video films such as Die Hard 2 (which contains 264 violent deaths) and Robocop (81 violent deaths) (Eron, 1993; see Hughes & Hasbrouck, 1996).

In an effort to further understand the content of American television, the National

Television Violence Study (NTVS)--the most extensive research on television violence of its kind, rigorously examined more than 10,000 hours of programming across a variety of channels, cable and noncable, at all hours of the day in three consecutive years from 1994 to 1997 (Villani, 2001). There was surprising consistency of the data from year to year, with an alarming amount of violence present. It was estimated that young people viewed 10, 000 acts of violence per year, with 61% of shows containing violence of some kind.

However, quantities of violence do not tell the whole story. We need to know more about the context of violence on the screen, because the way in which violence is portrayed is perhaps more important than sheer amount, in predicting the likely harm to the audience.

Thus, content analysts began to report the context surrounding violent acts. By the 1980s, the measuring of context was becoming a feature in many reports on television violence.

For example, Williams, Zabrack, and Joy (1982) examined the contextual factors of intentionality, consequences of the act, and humor of the presentation. Sherman and Dominick (1986) looked at the outcome of violent acts and the use of weapons. Potter and Ware (1987) examined reward, justification, motivation, and hero status of the character. By the mid-1990s, content analysts were typically looking at dozens of contextual variables.

The NTVS has further shown that the nature of the study of television violence's impact on viewers has been changed from quantity to context.

Based on the findings of the NTVS in terms of the context of television violence, it is noteworthy that 26% of violent interactions involved the use of weapons, 38% of violent acts were committed by "attractive perpetrators," more than 50% of violent incidents showed no apparent pain associated with the violence, and almost 75% of violent acts involved no evident remorse, criticism, or penalty for the violence. Furthermore, humor accompanied the violence in 41% of the incidents.

Wilson's research (et al., 2002) focused on one important dimension of context which relates to the perpetrators and whether the violence they commit is glamorized. They found that roughly 40% of perpetrators are attractive characters who can serve as role models for viewers, and roughly a third of the violent incidents they commit are justified. The vast majority of these perpetrators rarely experience remorse or criticism at the time they commit the violence. In other words, most violence on television is condoned.

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The effects of violent portrayals on viewers

The media effects literature has established a general consensus that television violence would have a negative impact on viewers; among them, there are three primary types of effects out of viewing television violence: learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors, desensitization to violence and fear of being victimized by violence. These effects of television violence have been hypothesized to occur via a number of mechanisms, principal among which are: imitation, disinhibition, desensitization, and arousal.

The hypothesis of imitation assumes that viewers are inclined to learn from behaviors they see performed by television characters, and copy the actions themselves.

In specific laboratory settings, research findings have indicated that children can be encouraged to behave in more aggressive ways following exposure to media violence, with this effect attributed partly to observational learning in which children imitate the behaviors of the models they observed (Bandura & Watlers, 1963; Baron, 1977) and partly to disinhibition.

Disinhibition hypothesizes that watching violence on television may legitimize the use of violence by the viewer in real life by undermining social sanctions against behaving violently that normally work to inhibit such behavior.

According to Bandura (1986), people often refrain from engaging in aggressive behavior because they anticipate that such actions will result in either social censure in the form of punishment and incarceration, or self-reproach, that is, feelings of guilt and shame. The nature or way in which violence is presented in the media can influence whether sanctions against already learned aggressive behavior are activated or not. Therefore, social cognitive theory posits that viewing certain types of violent depictions also can weaken restraints over previously learned behavior (Bandura, 1994). This process is referred to as disinhibition.

As for desensitization, according to this hypothesis, repeated viewing of television violence leads to a reduction in emotional responsiveness to violence on the screen and also to an increased acceptance of violence in real life.

A few attempts have been made to provide practical demonstrations of a desensitization effect of television violence on the younger viewers.

Two studies looked at whether watching television violence affected the response

of 8-year-olds who witnessed a real fight between two other children in a playroom. Results showed that children who viewed violence were less likely to behave responsibly and seek the help of an adult to stop the fight (Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Thomas, Horton, Lippincott & Drabman,1977).

Thomas, Horton, Lippincott and Drabman (1977) argued that "repeated observation of violent acts in dramatic television programs can result in the blunting of viewers' emotional sensitivity to similar aggressive actions."

The fear effect is defined by Cantor (1994) as an immediate physiological effect of arousal, along with an emotional reaction of anxiety and distress.

It is one of the earliest recorded effects of media violence (Blumer, 1933, see Potter, 1999). Research on the immediate emotional reaction of fear, especially in children, has continued over the decades. And the results of this line of research are fairly consistent (Cantor, 1994). In most cases, the depictions of unjustified, rewarded and realistic violence would escalate the fear effect.

The contextual features of violent portrayals and their impact on viewers

Violence on television may be presented in many different forms and settings. It may be performed by heroic characters or by villains. It may be rewarded or punished. Violence may occur without much victim pain and suffering, or it may cause tremendous physical anguish. It may be shown close-up on the screen or at a distance. These and other similar variations represent the context of television violence.

Research reveals that the context or the way in which violence is presented influences how viewers interpret and ultimately respond to telelvised acts of aggression (Comstock & Paik, 1991; Gunter, 1994).

Thus, the contextual features hold important implications for the influence of television violence on the audience. Some depictions of violence are likely to contribute to harmful effects on viewers, whereas other portrayals may be pro-social and beneficial for the audience.

Because viewers use these contextual characteristics to construct their meaning of violent portrayals, it is important to examine how the information contained in these cues is processed by viewers.

The following paragraphs explain how the contextual features specified by the

National Television Violence Study (Vol. 1, 1997) create the effects, such as learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors, desensitization to violence and fear of being victimized by violence on viewers through imitation, disinhibition, desensitization and arousal.

1. Justification

Reviews of the effects research conclude that justification of violent acts leads to higher aggression. Several experiments supported for these arguments. For example, Berkowitz and Rawlings (1963) found that justification of filmed aggression lowers viewers' inhibitions to aggress in real life.

The motives and values of the perpetrators of violence, as well as the targets, are important elements in affecting viewers' judgments about justification of violence (Ball-Rokeach, 1972).

Viewers are influenced by the apparent motives of the perpetrators when they assess the meaning of the violence. When a motive legitimates the violence, that violence is regarded as justified, and viewers are more likely to exhibit a disinhibition effect.

The one motive that has been found to lead to the strongest disinhibition is vengeance (Berkowitz & Alioto, 1973; Geen & Stonner, 1973, 1974; Hoyt, 1970). Berkowitz and Alioto (1973) introduced a film of a sporting event (boxing and football) by saying that the participants were acting either as professionals wanting to win or as motivated by vengeance and wanting to hurt the other. They found that the vengeance film led to more shocks and longer duration of shocks in a subsequent test of participants. When violence was portrayed as vengeance, disinhibition was stronger than when violence was portrayed as self-defense (Hoyt, 1970) or as a means of achieving altruistic goals (Geen & Stonner, 1974).

Rule and Ferguson (1986) argued, "Overall the studies seem to show that there are degrees of justification, depending upon one's moral philosophy. For example, from an 'eye for an eye' philosophy, vengeance may be perceived as more justified than prosocial aggression; consequently, the degree of perceived justification will affect the extent to which aggression is inhibited"(p. 36).

Gunter (1985) reinforced this position by arguing that the legal or moral context of the portrayed behavior is an important mediator of public perceptions of violence.

Defensive or altruistic aggression may be interpreted as milder than offensive, intentional, or sadistic aggression.

Socially sanctioned acts communicate to the viewer that violence, under certain conditions, is morally right or an acceptable means for solving interpersonal conflict. As a result, exposure to such acts may reduce or fail to activate a viewer's inhibition to aggress.

Research shows that exposure to justified violence increases the probability of aggressive behavior, especially among provoked participants (Berkowitz & Powers, 1979; Geen, 1981; Geen & Stonner, 1973; Geen & Stonner, 1974; Meyer, 1972).

A meta-analysis of over 200 studies by Paik and Comstock (1994) revealed that television violence has a stronger effect on aggression when it is depicted as justified or socially sanctioned behavior.

On the other hand, violence that seems unjustified or undeserved, especially if targeted at innocent victims, may increase viewers' fear (Bryant, Carveth, & Brown, 1981).

2. The consequences of violence—the victim's harm and pain

Another inhibiting contextual feature is the portrayal of negative consequences to the victim.

Pain and harm cues remind the viewer that there are serious and harmful effects associated with physical aggression. Such portrayals should also activate inhibitory mechanisms, such as empathy or sympathy, thereby decreasing the risk of aggressive behavior.

Research shows that the explicit depiction of a victim's harm and pain can decrease or inhibit the learning of aggression among viewers (Baron, 1971a, 1971b; Wotring & Greenberg, 1973).

Goranson (1969) showed people a film of a prizefight in which either there were no consequences or the loser of the fight received a bad beating and later died. The participants who did not see the negative consequences were more likely to behave aggressively after the viewing.

Many studies show that when violence is portrayed without any consequences, such as pain, suffering, sorrow, and remorse, viewers are not likely to feel inhibited in performing aggressively, and their levels of aggressive behavior usually increase. This

conclusion was argued by Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, and Roberts (1978) in their extensive review of the effects literature. Stein and Friedrich (1972), however, concluded that this effect did not exist in their review of the literature. But more recent reviewers are convinced that this is an important contextual factor (Comstock, 1985; National Television Violence Study, 1998).

3. Violent portrayals with humor

When humor is linked to violence, it has been found to lower inhibitions toward committing acts of aggression by subjects in controlled experiments (Baron, 1978; Berkowitz, 1970). Zillmann (1979) argued that humor can increase a viewer's arousal, which leads to a greater probability of behaving aggressively in real life.

Bandura(1990) argued that in violent programming, perpetrators often use humor to dehumanize or debase their victims, which can short-circuit empathic responding, thereby disinhibiting individuals to aggress.

Furthermore, humor may distort, undermine, or trivialize the seriousness of violence and its consequences, which can increase the probability of aggression.

In addition, according to Jablonski and Zillmann (1995), violence that is portrayed as humorous may desensitize viewers to the seriousness of such behaviors (see Wilson et al., 2002).

4. Rewards and Punishments

Rewards and punishments constitute an important contextual element and a key part of a person's schema about violence. Rewards and punishments to perpetrators of violence provide important information to viewers about which actions are acceptable.

When characters are rewarded in media portrayals—as well as in real life—people who watch those portrayals are more likely to learn to behave in a similar manner. Especially, viewers who watch a model rewarded for performing violently in the media are more likely to experience a disinhibition effect and behave in a similar manner.

Furthermore, research indicates children may imitate a model's antisocial behavior so long as there is no explicit punishment delivered to the model, presumably because the lack of punishment actually serves as a sanction for such

behavior.

According to Bandura (1965), the absence of punishment can not only lead to dishibition but also show the modeling effect; the perpetrators need not be rewarded in order for disinhibition and modeling to occur. In other words, violence that is explicitly rewarded or simply goes unpunished increases the risk of learning aggression.

But when violence is condemned or punished in the media portrayal, the risk of learning aggression is decreased and the aggressiveness of viewers is likely to be inhibited (Comstock et al., 1978; Lando & Donnerstein, 1978)). In addition, when nonaggressive characters are rewarded, viewers' level of aggression can be reduced (Lando & Donnerstein, 1978).

On the other hand, violence that goes unpunished can elevate fear, particularly when it appears to be unjust or random (Bryant et al., 1981).

5. Identification with the perpetrator

It has been well established that the more a person, especially a child, identifies with a character, the more likely the person will be influenced by that character's behavior. Identification seems to be a multifaceted construct composed of hero status, attractiveness, and similarity.

Viewers are more likely to identify with characters who are portrayed as heroes. For example, Liss, Reinhardt, and Fredriksen (1983) conducted two experiments on children from kindergarten through fourth grade to determine the impact of heroes in cartoons. They found that "the superheroes are compelling, attractive, and evidently above reproach, making their actions highly visible and favorable for generalized imitation" (p. 184).

According to social cognitive theory, as well as empirical research, an engaging or attractive perpetrator can be a potent role model, especially for children, and thus increases the likelihood that viewers will learn aggression from a portrayal (see Bandura, 1986, 1994). When violence is performed by an attractive character, the probability of aggression increases (Comstock et al., 1978; Hearold, 1986).

If the perpetrator of violence is perceived as similar to the viewer, the likelihood of learning to behave aggressively increases (Lieberman Reserch, 1975; Rosekrans & Hartup, 1967; see Potter, 1999).

6. Realism of violence

Another important contextual feature concerns the degree of realism associated with a violent portrayal.

Several studies indicate that realistic portrayals of violence can foster the learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviors among viewers. For example, Berkowitz and Alioto (1973) found that exposure to a war film led to more aggression among adult males when it was described as a documentary than when it was labeled a Hollywood production.

And in a study by Feshbach (1972), 9- to 11-year-old children were exposed to the same campus riot footage that was described either as part of a news story or as a Hollywood film. Children who perceived the content to be more realistic subsequently behaved more aggressively. Atkin (1983) obtained similar results when 10- to 13-year-olds viewed the same violent scene presented within an actual newscast, as compared to viewing the scene within a movie promo.

In addition, the realism of a portrayal can elevate fear responses in viewers. Lazarus, Opton, Nomikos, & Rankin (1965) found that adults were less physiologically aroused to a movie showing gory accidents when the events had been introduced as fake compared to no such introduction.

In another experiment, children who thought that a threatening creature depicted in a movie actually existed in their city were more frightened by the scene than were those who did not believe the creature was a realistic threat (Cantor & Hoffner, 1990).

7. Extent and graphicness of violence

Violence that is extensive or graphic can enhance the risk of all three harmful outcomes.

Huesman and his colleagues have demonstrated that the more TV violence children watch in a given year, the more likely they are to behave aggressively in subsequent years (Huesmann, 1986; Huesmann, Eron, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1984).

Furthermore, exposure to extensive graphic violence, either within a single program or across several programs, also produces desensitization to violence (see Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Mullin & Linz, 1995).

Though less well documented, extensive or graphic violence also can increase fear among viewers (Ogles & Hoffner, 1987)

8. Presence of weapons in violent portrayals

Berkowitz (1984, 1990) argued that certain visual cues in a film can activate or "prime" aggressive thoughts and behaviors in a viewer, and that weapons can function as such cues.

In support of this idea, a recent meta-analysis of 56 published experiments found that the presence of weapons, either pictorially or in the natural environment, significantly enhanced aggression among angered as well as non-angered subjects (Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, & Miller, 1990).

In particular, weapons like guns and knives are more likely than unconventional means to instigate or prime aggression in viewers because they are commonly associated with previous violent events stored in memory, according to Berkowitz (1990). Thus, a television portrayal that features traditional weapons poses the greatest risk for the so-called "weapons effect" on audiences.

Table 1 attached herein outlines some contextual factors that would affect the potential risk for the audience.

Table 1. Predicted Impact of Contextual factors on Three Outcomes of Exposure to Media Violence

Predicted Impact of Contextual factors on Three Outcomes of Exposure to Media Violence			
	Outcomes of media violence		
Contextual Factors	Learning	Fear	Desensitization
Attractive perpetrator	↑		
Attractive target		↓	
Justified violence	↑		
Unjustified violence	↓	↑	
Presence of weapons	↑		
Extensive/graphic violence	↑	↑	↑
Realistic violence	↑	↑	
Rewards	↑	↑	
Punishments	↓	↓	
Pain/harm cues	↓		
Humor	↑		↑

" ↑ " means likely to increase the outcome

" ↓ " means likely to decrease the outcome

Source: Taken from Wilson et al. (1998). Violence in television programming overall: University of California, Santa Barbara study. National Television Violence Study, Vol.2, p.14.

The picture of media violence

Considering the features of violent portrayals mentioned above, the picture of media violence is saddening, because the media at the present time are full of violence and its context has the effect of imitation, disinhibition and desensitization, making viewers readily susceptible to media violence.

The study of Potter (1999) analyzed the context of violent portrayals in the media and found that media violence is often portrayed this way:

1. Most of the violence is intentional, and usually the motives are not prosocial.

Rarely is violence portrayed as an accident. As for the motives in fictional shows, Williams (et al, 1982) reported that in 97% of violent acts on television, the perpetrators intended harm. Potter (et al, 1995) found that 58% of the acts were malicious and 33% were inconsiderate. In addition, in half the acts, the motive was to hurt the victim either physically or emotionally.

While in nonfiction, Potter (et al, 1997) found that 60% of motives for violence consisted of malice.

2. Consequences for the victims are rarely shown.

In most portrayals of violence, the victim is not shown in pain or suffering. In fictional programming, Williams (et al, 1982) reported that more than 81% of violent acts depicted no impairment to the victims. In 76% of violent scenes, no physical outcome of the violence was shown, and 90% of the scenes showed no emotional impact on characters (Center for Media and Public Affairs, 1994; see Potter, 1999).

The National Television Violence Study (NTVS) reported that in 47% of all violent interactions absolutely no harm was shown, and in 58% of violent scenes, the target showed no pain. In addition, in only 16% of all programs with violence was there a portrayal of long-term negative consequences such as psychological, financial, or emotional harm (Smith et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 1997,1998).

In nonfictional programming, Potter (et al., 1997) found that 53.4% of the violent acts had no consequences for the victim, and 17.2% had only minor consequences. The NTVS reported that 87% of acts of visual violence in reality-based programs showed no long-term negative consequences (Whitney et al., 1997).

3. The perpetrators often are not punished.

Potter and Ware (1987) found that only 12% of violent acts were portrayed as being punished. The NTVS reported that 19% of violent interactions in fictional programming were shown as punished, and another 8% were shown with both reward and punishment immediately after the action.

As for nonfiction, Potter (et al., 1997) reported that 77.4% of the violent acts were not punished in any way. In reality-based programming, 67% of acts showed no punishment (Wartella, Whitney, et al., 1998; Whitney et al., 1997).

When looking at the entire show, the rates of punishment were higher, because another 40% of perpetrators were punished at the end of the show (Smith et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 1997, 1998). Still, about 37% of the perpetrators remained unpunished anywhere in the program for committing a violent act.

4. Much of the violence is justified.

The amount of justification changes depending on the perspective from which it is judged. Potter and Ware (1987) found that 93% of violent instances were justified from the perspective of the perpetrator—not by society.

The NTVS defined justification primarily in terms of motives: violence used to protect oneself or one's family or to retaliate against an attack was regarded as justified. With this perspective on justification, the NTVS found that 32% of all violent interactions were judged to be justified (Wilson et al., 1998).

5. Weapons are often found in violent acts.

The NTVS said that in fictional programming, guns were used in one forth of all violent interactions, and that other kinds of weapons were used in another one third of all violent interactions. The most prevalent form of violence, however, was natural means—the use of nothing more than the perpetrator's body (Smith et al., 1999; Wilson et al., 1997, 1998).

In reality-based programming, guns were used in 44% of visually depicted violent interactions (Wartella, Whitney, et al., 1998; Whitney et al., 1997).

6. Much of the violence is portrayed in a humorous context.

Humor is a common context for violence. For example, Smythe (1954) found that about one fourth of all acts and threats of violence were committed in a humorous context, and that the humorous context was more common in programs for children than in those for a general audience. And Gerbner's analyses of children's programs

from 1967 to 1985 had the same finding that the children's programming contained the highest rates, about 73%, of humorous violence (Signorielli, 1990).

In addition, the NTVS found that 39% of violent interactions occurred in a humorous context in fictional programming (Wartella, Whitney, et al., 1998; Whitney et al., 1997).

Potter and Warren (1998) found that when presented in a humorous context, the violence also appeared with other contextual factors that tended to trivialize it.

Differences between media violence and real-life violence

There are many differences between media violence and real-life violence.

First, Gerbner (1992) criticized television for displaying a predominance of what he calls "happy violence," or portrayals that do not show any pain or tragic consequences to the victims and their loved ones (see National Television Violence Study, 1997) .

Potter (et al., 1995) also pointed out a substantial difference in the patterns in the area of consequences of violence. In real life, violence carries serious physical, emotional, and psychological consequences. But in the television world, the portrayal of violence largely neglects the harmful consequences for the victims. Television presents to viewers a very unrealistic picture of the nature of violence.

Furthermore, according to Groves (1997), violence on television often is disconnected from real consequences. The differences are as follows:

1. Television violence is clean, which means that it includes bloodless presentation, minimal suffering, and invincible cartoon character.
2. The use of violence on television is rewarded frequently.
3. On television, there is a clear delineation between the good guy and the bad guy, unlike real life, in which there often are indistinct boundaries between good and bad.
4. On television, the good guy gets recognition, material reward, and increases status; the bad guy suffers and is made to look weak or stupid. The heroes may have good values, and the message may be prosocial, but it is conveyed in ways that make violence seem justified.
5. Violence on television also may be humorous. The movie Home Alone, which has been shown on network television, is an example of violence that is

portrayed as humor. It conveys the message that if violence is funny, it is acceptable.

The most disturbing problem in the media—linking violence with pleasure

In addition to the saddening picture of media violence, which is full of the depictions detrimental to viewers mentioned above, another disturbing problem in the media is the linkage of violence with pleasure.

Nowadays, quite a few entertaining movies and television programs portray violence as a solution to the many problems in real life.

Worseningly enough, violence in the media intertwined with entertainment helps to create an environment in which very young viewers enjoy violence as a means of amusement. Under such circumstances, their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward violence truly deserve our concern.

When an American high-school teacher told her students about the Jonesboro shootings, her students reacted with laughters. Similar reactions are omnipresent all the time across U.S. movie theaters, where young audiences laugh and cheer and keep right on eating popcorn and drinking pop while watching bloody violence..

A former Army officer and professor at West Point and the University of Arkansas, David Grossman argued, “We have raised a generation of barbarians who have learned to associate violence with pleasure. The result is a phenomenon that functions much like AIDS, which I call AVIDS—Acquired Violence Immune Deficiency Syndrome” (Grossman, 1998).

With the advances in the communication technology and the applications of new communication equipment, disguised by various faces and with increasing outlets, television violence has become more complex and elusive.

There is an eerie likelihood that violent movies and violent games amplify one another--the film and television images placing thoughts of carnage into the psyche while the games condition the trigger finger to act on those impulses.

Grossman asserts interactive video games are even more directly connected to aggressive behaviors, because contemporary video games often are, in Grossman’s words, “operant conditioning firing ranges with pop-up targets and immediate feedback” (New York Times, April 26, 1999). Interactive media games allow children

to participate in the violence, to learn to be violent by rewarding players for successful violent behaviors.

A tragic shooting spree that happened at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999 shocked the whole world. Those bloody incidents occurring on one campus after another in recent years have made people ask one question: why on earth a teenager would just kill and not give a damn about killing?

Grossman states that people don't naturally kill, but that they learn to kill. This stance is echoed by a study done in World War II, during which U.S. Army Brig. Gen. S. L. A. Marshall had a team of researchers study what soldiers had done in combat. For the first time in history, they asked individual soldiers what they had done in battle. They discovered that only 15% to 20% of the individual riflemen could bring themselves to fire at an exposed enemy soldier. The military authorities then used brutalization, classical conditioning, operant conditioning and role modeling to train soldiers to kill, with the aim of increasing "the firing rate"--that is, the percentage of soldiers who would actually fire a weapon during an encounter. By the Korean War, around 55% of the soldiers were willing to fire to kill. And by Vietnam, the rate rose to over 90% (Grossman, 1998).

Grossman said, the violent content in the media uses these conditioning techniques which were used to teach Vietnam-bound soldiers to kill automatically in battle encounters, yet respect authority and make split-second distinctions between friends and enemies. The difference is that today these same techniques are not tempered by such respect or distinctions. What is worse, he added, the media teach us to associate violence with pleasure.

As a result, Grossman wrote: "We are reaching that stage of desensitization at which the inflicting of pain and suffering has become a source of entertainment; vicarious pleasure rather than revulsion. We are learning to kill, and we are learning to like it" (New York Times, April 26,1999).

Conclusion

The modern-day media run on profit and cater to viewers' entertainment needs. With the help of state-of-the-art communication technologies, they bring incredibly vivid violence-ridden pictures before viewers. Furthermore, by adopting the violent portrayal which has the effect of modeling and disinhibition, media violence will no

doubt have an increasingly unfavorable impact on viewers.

But, some people in the entertainment industry argued that violent programming is harmless because no studies exist proving a connection between violence in the media and aggressive behavior in children. They also argued that young people know that television, movies, and video games are simply fantasy.

However, they are wrong on both counts. Over 1000 studies—including the Surgeon General Report in 1972 and the National Institute of Mental Health Report in 1982—attest to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children (Comstock & Strasburger, 1993; Klein, et al. 1993; Strasburger, 1993).

Furthermore, children under age 8, cannot uniformly discriminate between "real life" and "fantasy/entertainment" (Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988). And they quickly learn that violence is an acceptable solution to resolving even complex problems, particularly if the aggressor is a hero (Comstock & Strasburger, 1993).

A U.S. News & World Report poll found that 92% of Americans think that television contributes to violence in this country, and 65% think that entertainment programs on television have a negative influence on American life (Culture & Ideas, 1994; see Potter, 1999). Even college professors think that the influence of television is mostly negative. According to a poll of 500 college-level teachers and communication scholars, 66% believe that exposure to television increases aggressive behavior (Bybee, Robinson, & Turow, 1982; see Potter, 1999)

Other public opinion polls also reported that 75% of American adults now believe televised violence contributes to real-world crime and aggression, and a comparable proportion feel that Hollywood should do more to reduce violence in entertainment programming (Lacayo, 1995, see Wilson et al, 2002).

Both the polls and a series of felonies have proven that media violence has a negative impact on the audience.

For example, in the horrific events at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, two suspects who committed the slayings were allegedly wearing trenchcoats and smirking out loud while pulling the trigger. This tragic crime case that had shocked the whole world bears a marked semblance to a Hollywood hit entitled "The Basketball Diaries," in which the lead actor who also wears a trenchcoat guns down his teacher and schoolmates under the influence of narcotics.

In actuality, not only this single case but also a sequence of brow-raising crimes,

such as other campus homicides that had sent chills across American society over recent years and the fatal sniperings that occurred last October in the U.S. capital city of Washington, seem to have clearly demonstrated the hugely negative influence of the media.

However, not all violent portrayals are equal in terms of the risk they might pose, as indicated in the above discussion. And there seems to be a silver lining, because the media industry itself has recognized that violence can have different meanings depending upon how it is presented within a program.

In a policy statement, the National Cable Television Association (1993) stipulated that, "…the gratuitous use of violence depicted as an easy and convenient solution to human problems is harmful to our industry and to society. We therefore discourage and will strive to reduce the frequency of such exploitative uses of violence while preserving our right to show programs that convey the real meaning and consequences of violent behavior" (see National Television Violence Study, 1997).

Similarly, the Network Television Association (1992) issued standards for the depiction of violence that warn against showing, "callousness or indifference to suffering, "scenes where children are victims," and "portrayals of the use of weapons or implements readily accessible" to children. Most of these programming guidelines focus on contextual cues and the different ways that violence can be portrayed (see National Television Violence Study, 1997).

With the recognition in mind, all the media industry has to do is put these programming guidelines into action. But when we witness the picture of media violence nowadays, it seems that the action has not been fully taken in reducing the more and more violent and distorted representations of the real world.

Thus, by understanding the impact different contextual features of violent portrayals would have on the audience, the writer suggests that the media industry take the responsibility to cut down on violence on the screen or avoid negative contextual features.

In addition, this literature review has pointed out a trend in the research of television violence, that is, the nature of the study of television violence's impact on viewers has been changed from quantity to context.

This trend is noteworthy, because different violent portrayals and contexts will have different influences on viewers and the way in which violence is portrayed is

perhaps more important than sheer amount, in predicting the likely harm to the audience. Thus, before we evaluate television violence's impact on viewers, it is essential for us to understand different contextual features of violent portrayals.

However, we had paid little attention to this; therefore, in this writer's opinion, we should do some research, as they have done in the U.S., on the contextual features of violent portrayals in local programming and their impact on viewers, so that we can provide guidelines for producers of local programs. In this way, the audiences will enjoy a better media environment.

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