

Disclaimer: This is a machine generated PDF of selected content from our databases. This functionality is provided solely for your convenience and is in no way intended to replace original scanned PDF. Neither Cengage Learning nor its licensors make any representations or warranties with respect to the machine generated PDF. The PDF is automatically generated "AS IS" and "AS AVAILABLE" and are not retained in our systems. CENGAGE LEARNING AND ITS LICENSORS SPECIFICALLY DISCLAIM ANY AND ALL EXPRESS OR IMPLIED WARRANTIES, INCLUDING WITHOUT LIMITATION, ANY WARRANTIES FOR AVAILABILITY, ACCURACY, TIMELINESS, COMPLETENESS, NON-INFRINGEMENT, MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR A PARTICULAR PURPOSE. Your use of the machine generated PDF is subject to all use restrictions contained in The Cengage Learning Subscription and License Agreement and/or the Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints Terms and Conditions and by using the machine generated PDF functionality you agree to forgo any and all claims against Cengage Learning or its licensors for your use of the machine generated PDF functionality and any output derived therefrom.

Researchers Have Not Proven That Media Violence Merits Policy Changes

Author: Edward Castronova

Editor: Stefan Kiesbye

Date: 2010

From: Is Media Violence a Problem?

Publisher: Gale, a Cengage Company

Series: At Issue

Document Type: Viewpoint essay

Length: 2,176 words

Content Level: (Level 3)

Lexile Measure: 990L

Full Text:

Article Commentary

Edward Castronova, "Media Violence, Aggression, and Policy," Terra Nova Blog, May 25, 2009. www.terranova.blogs.com.
Reproduced by permission of the author.

Edward Castronova is a professor of telecommunications at Indiana University. He is a founder of scholarly virtual world studies and an expert on the societies of large-scale online games. Among his academic publications on these topics are the books *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* and *Exodus to the Virtual World: How Online Fun Is Changing Reality*.

The scientific research on media violence has been hampered by eagerness to prove or disprove theories on the effects of violent content on young viewers. Instead of truly trying to investigate the relationship between media and real-world aggression, researchers have only sought material supporting their hypotheses. Insufficient and misinterpreted data yield conclusions that point to a crisis that is merely stated, not proven, and give policy makers false reason to demand changes in television and media content and regulation.

There's no solid evidence that violence in media causes violence in society, certainly not at the level that would warrant any kind of policy response. Here at [the blog] Terra Nova, this has been discussed again and again.... Yet the issue will not die, or, more accurately, a misguided conversation continues and at times certain points need to be reiterated. The immediate spurs to this post include a) getting an e-mail about video game violence effects from an undergraduate at another school, b) seeing one of Indiana's PhD students give a talk on video game violence, and c) seeing media effects being debated at the International Communications Association meeting in Chicago this past weekend [May 2009]. Researchers continue to pursue evidence for a causal link between violence in media and real-world violence, and important people in the real world still think there's some sort of emergency.

Media Violence Research Has Produced No Results

Common-sense objections to the agenda and the urgency are legion.... Yet there are deeper issues, of a scholarly nature, that need to be addressed as well. Research in the field of media violence effects is generally ill-conceived, poorly executed, and result-driven. I have seen few things that I would describe as findings—results that become a permanent part of my view of the world and how it works. Before any more PhD students waste their careers on bad science, let's once again put the cards on the table.

To begin at the end: Scientific research should not be framed as the pursuit of evidence for something. To do so violates the important norm of disinterestedness. You are not supposed to care how the numbers turn out. The proper way to think of things is "What causes Y?" not "Can I find evidence that X might affect Y?" The Y here is violence in society. We know that the main causes of violence in society are parents and peers. A disinterested scholar would stop there. Yet in media violence research, the norm is to go looking for a link. One senses that in most papers nothing would be sent to the journal until some evidence for the link was found.

How does one get that sense? This is the second major issue: significance. In scholarly writing, the term significance refers to a very specialized statistical feature known in most fields as statistical significance. It is a measure of the accuracy of a finding. It is also widely misunderstood and improperly applied. (How do I know? Training under econometrician Arthur Goldberger.) Look at it this way: You are the captain of the ship. The engineer comes and says that some rivets in the hull are weakening and are about to pop. Yet you can only fix them one at a time. Your first question is, what rivet is weakest? That is where the engineer should start. Oddly,

in psychology and the social sciences, one insists that the engineer start working instead on the rivet whose weakness is most accurately measured. "We think rivet 12 is weakest, but we know more about rivet 34, so let's start there. By the way, rivet 34 seems to be pretty strong."

The media violence field gets its energy from its ostensible policy relevance.

Social Sciences Fail the Public

In media violence research, it appears to be a universal practice that the accuracy of an effect's measurement is presented always first, and often exclusively. The size of the effect is considered secondary, if it is considered at all. In my experience of articles and presentations in this field, I have yet to see a sentence in the following form: "All else equal, a 10 percent increase in this measure of media violence leads to an X% increase in this measure of social violence." This is a very simple simulation of effect, and it seems never to be done.

Here's how the first two issues are related: If the research paradigm is to hunt for effects, and the standard of a "finding" is based on statistical significance, it is usually easy to produce the desired result. The nature of statistical significance is such that if you mess around with the data set enough, eventually some set of controls and procedures causes the computer to pop out an asterisk indicating statistical significance on the media violence variable. This is why the paper says, "Although no overall media-aggression link was found, a link was found among children who identify with a violent character." Meaning, if you split the data into those-who-identify and those-who-don't, you find the desired link in the former group. In any reasonably complex data set, there will be some subgroup or some tweak that generates statistical significance. It's a mechanical thing in the end. And thus, when a researcher produces an entire career of papers showing the same result over and over, you get the sense that the disinterestedness norm is being violated. This scholar is not in the least disinterested. He knows what he is after and he is going to find it. The only way that disinterestedness could be restored in this field would be for scholars to forget about statistical significance and examine instead the real-world significance of findings, by means of these simple simulation sentences. Let's talk about the rivets that seem weakest. Assertions of real-world significance are not popped out by SPSS [a computer program used for statistical analysis]. They cannot be cooked. If media effects researchers want to be trusted, they should abandon statistical significance as the measure of truth.

You could, if you wanted, study the relationship of dogs' ears to the sounds of motors, but you'll never find solid evidence that dogs get happy when their people drive into the garage.

Asking the Wrong Questions

The issue of significance goes beyond statistical significance, however, into the realm of policy significance. The media violence field gets its energy from its ostensible policy relevance. Yet the research questions are not framed in a way that is helpful for policy. The policy question is simple: If we regulate media violence, will social violence fall? But the research asks: If we expose this person to violent media, how will he act in the next hour? The latter is not relevant to the former. Or, there does not seem to be a good theory explaining why the latter is relevant. Yes, there are diagrams of boxes and arrows known as theories, but they are really just conceptual overviews, informal and heuristic [educated guesses], and cannot be used to measure or explain how a social effect emerges from a lab effect. As an example, suppose we use an Aggressometer to measure a person's aggressive mental state, and find that viewing *Star Wars* increases the Aggressometer by 20 percent. The question now becomes, if we show *Star Wars* generally in the public, we are generally going to have a 20 percent increase in Aggressometer readings. What theory tells me how this is specifically going to change the crime rate? I need to know that, because I need to evaluate policy in a common-sense way. Keeping a million kids from watching *Star Wars* costs society \$7m [million] in lost entertainment value. Is the purported value of crime reduction more or less than that? A box-and-arrow diagram does not help. If the research is going to stay focused on the mind, we need a good theory to connect mind outcomes to policy outcomes otherwise the research isn't relevant for policy and should be labeled as such: "Warning: Not for Use by Legislators." ...

Why is it so hard to find answers in this area? Fuzziness. The media violence-aggression field has chosen to study two things that do not admit accurate observation. What is media violence? What kind of a thing is it? The policy debate seems to assume it is a continuous variable that acts as a gloss on a piece of media. Thus, you can apparently make a movie less violent by taking away an explosion. Similarly, what is aggression? It appears to be taken as some sort of negative gloss on a person, such that if you make them more aggressive you make the world a worse place. Needless to say, taking aggression and violence as separable from the whole entities in which they are observed is a fuzzy and probably fundamentally wrongheaded way to approach things. You could, if you wanted, study the relationship of dogs' ears to the sounds of motors, but you'll never find solid evidence that dogs get happy when their people drive into the garage. You need to study dogs and people, not ears and motors. In fact the only reason you might study ears and motors separately is that you had some agenda to promote the motor industry by showing that it makes dogs happy. But of course, that wouldn't be disinterested.

Going in the Wrong Direction

I cooked up a silly example. Consider the following report:

Textiles scholars have studied the effect of softness in cloth on affection. Children rubbed with soft cloth as opposed to scratchy cloth self-report significantly higher levels of affection and exhibit more affectionate behaviors (hugging teddy bears, for example). Responding to these findings, and acting out of a concern about the dramatic declines in affection in recent decades, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children's exposure to soft cloth be maximized. The State of California has mandated that all cloth sold to minors must meet a minimum standard of SS+ (from the industry's cloth softness self-rating system). Unfortunately, the laws have been struck down as an improper extension of

government authority, as stated in the 28th Amendment ("Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of the textile manufacturer"). Nonetheless, pressure continues for some sort of government response to the softness-affection crisis.

Ridiculous, of course. The PTA's insistence that school kids wear velvet boots would last one rainy day, and that would be it. But to be more specific about what's wrong here:

1. The research deals with vague value-laden concepts, not objective observables.
2. The findings are not disinterested. Somebody's looking for something.
3. There is no evidence of a crisis at the social level.
4. The pediatricians' recommendation to parents assumes thoroughly incompetent parents.
5. So does the policy.
6. The policy asserts an unrealistic level of measurement and control.
7. The relevance of the findings for the policy is nowhere demonstrated.
8. "Significantly" refers to statistical significance, not real-world significance.

There's not much difference between the cloth-softness debate and the media violence debate, unfortunately.

People and their art are certainly worthy of study. But if we are going to be scientific about it, there are certain rules that must be followed. Following those rules might mean that some questions simply elude us....

In the end, I suspect that media violence research has been motivated primarily by aesthetic concerns.

Questioning the Motivations of Media Violence Research

If you want me to believe that regulating violence in media would make our world a better place, you'll have to walk me around the world and through history, and help me to imaginatively experience a culture in which control of expression led to more happiness. I wander around in history a lot — it's been a hobby for decades — and I don't know of any such culture. Even fantasizing about the future, I am not seeing anything good.

In the end, I suspect that media violence research has been motivated primarily by aesthetic concerns. *The Three Stooges* is disgusting and vulgar, whereas *King Lear* is sublime. Why are we watching so much crap? Back in the day, you could make the aesthetic plea directly: Look here, you are watching bad art, and you shouldn't — just because it is bad. Today, aesthetic disgust gets channeled into sciency-sounding condemnations of entire media forms for their "effects." In our free-thinking age, no one can effectively change anyone's mind by asserting that *Grand Theft Auto* is simply adolescent, an 1812 Overture of bullying and nastiness, of low appeal. But because the age is also utilitarian, you can make the case that *Grand Theft Auto* has "bad effects": like cigarettes, you say, its use harms others.

Books

- Craig A. Anderson, Douglas A. Gentile, and Katherine E. Buckley *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research, and Public Policy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Mark Andrejevic *Reality TV: The Work of Being Watched*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.
- Hector Avalos *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005.
- Martin Barker and Julian Petley, eds. *Ill Effects: The Media/Violence Debate*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Jonathan Bignell *Big Brother: Reality TV in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn *Reality TV: Realism and Revelation*. London: Wallflower, 2005.
- Jane Buckingham, ed. *What's Next: The Experts' Guide: Predictions from 50 of America's Most Compelling People*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.
- Canadian Teachers' Federation *Kids' Take on Media: What 5,700 Canadian Kids Say About TV, Movies, Video and Computer Games and More*. Ottawa, Ontario, Canada: Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003.
- Nancy E. Dowd, Dorothy G. Singer, and Robin Fretwell Wilson, eds. *Handbook of Children, Culture, and Violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Jonathan L. Freedman *Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression: Assessing the Scientific Evidence*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2002.
- Douglas A. Gentile, ed. *Media Violence and Children: A Complete Guide for Parents and Professionals*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003.
- Interactive Digital Software Association *Video Games and Youth Violence: Examining the Facts*. Washington, DC: Interactive Digital Software Association, 2001.
- Henry Jenkins *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York: New York University Press, 2006.
- Deborah Jermyn *Crime Watching: Investigating Real Crime TV*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007.
- Gerard Jones *Killing Monsters: Why Children Need Fantasy, Super Heroes, and Make-Believe Violence*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Misha Kavka *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Steven J. Kirsh *Children, Adolescents, and Media Violence: A Critical Look at the Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006.
- Arthur G. Miller, ed. *The Social Psychology of Good and Evil*. New York: Guilford Press, 2004.
- Jolyon Mitchell *Media Violence and Christian Ethics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. 2nd ed. New York: New York University Press, 2009.
- W. James Potter *The 11 Myths of Media Violence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003.

- Harold Schechter *Savage Pastimes: A Cultural History of Violent Entertainment*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005.
- Karen Sternheimer *It's Not the Media: The Truth About Pop Culture's Influence on Children*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003.
- James P. Steyer *The Other Parent: The Inside Story of the Media's Effect on Our Children*. New York: Atria Books, 2002.
- David Trend *The Myth of Media Violence: A Critical Introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
- Bryan Vossekuil, Robert A. Fein, Marisa Reddy, Randy Borum, and William Modzeleski *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States*. Washington, DC: United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, 2002.

Periodicals

- American Academy of Pediatrics "Media Violence: Committee on Public Education," *Pediatrics*, vol. 108, no. 5, November 2001.
- Craig A. Anderson et al. "The Influence of Media Violence on Youth," *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, vol. 4, no. 3, December 2003.
- Asian News International "Violent Media 'Indeed Impacts Adolescent Behaviour,'" November 20, 2008.
- *Birmingham Post (England)* "Why We Must Protect Our Children from Violent Films," September 27, 2007.
- Brad J. Bushman and Craig A. Anderson "Media Violence and the American Public: Scientific Facts Versus Media Misinformation," *American Psychologist*, vol. 56, no. 6/7, June/July 2001.
- Brad J. Bushman and Joanne Cantor "Media Ratings for Violence and Sex: Implications for Policymakers and Parents," *American Psychologist*, vol. 58, no. 2, February 2003.
- Joanne Cantor and Barbara J. Wilson "Media and Violence: Intervention Strategies for Reducing Aggression," *Media Psychology*, vol. 5, no. 4, November 2003.
- Jason L. Deselms and Joanne D. Altman "Immediate and Prolonged Effects of Videogame Violence," *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, vol. 33, no. 8, August 2003.
- Jeanne B. Funk et al. "Violence Exposure in Real-Life, Video Games, Television, Movies, and the Internet: Is There Desensitization?" *Journal of Adolescence*, February 2004.
- Douglas A. Gentile and J. Ronald Gentile "Violent Video Games as Exemplary Teachers: A Conceptual Analysis," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, vol. 37, no. 2, February 2008.
- Douglas A. Gentile, Muniba Saleem, and Craig A. Anderson "Public Policy and the Effects of Media Violence on Children," *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 2007.
- Gary W. Giumetti and Patrick M. Markey "Violent Video Games and Anger as Predictors of Aggression," *Journal of Research in Personality*, 2007.
- Peter S. Goodman "Violent Media May Trim Real Violence, Study Says," *International Herald Tribune*, January 8, 2008.
- Kevin Haninger and Kimberly M. Thompson "Content and Ratings of Teen-Rated Video Games," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, February 2004.
- Alice Holbrook and Amy E. Singer "When Bad Girls Go Good: Models of the Self and Reality on VH1's *Flavor of Love Girls: Charm School*," *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, Spring 2009.
- David Kushner "With a Nudge or Vibration, Game Reality Reverberates," *New York Times*, July 3, 2003.
- Monique A. Levermore and Gina L. Salisbury "The Relationship Between Virtual & Actual Aggression: Youth Exposure to Violent Media," *Forensic Examiner*, June 22, 2009.
- Michel Marriott "Making High-Tech Play Less Work," *New York Times*, February 12, 2004.
- Andrew K. Przybylski, Richard M. Ryan, and C. Scott Rigby "The Motivating Role of Violence in Video Games," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, vol. 35, no. 2, 2009.
- Jill Richmond and J. Clare Wilson "Are Graphic Media Violence, Aggression and Moral Disengagement Related?" *Psychiatry, Psychology and Law*, July 1, 2008.
- Victoria Rideout and Elizabeth Hamel "The Media Family: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers, Preschoolers and Their Parents," Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, May 2006. www.kff.org.
- Lawrence I. Rosenkoetter et al. "Mitigating the Harmful Effects of Violent Television," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, vol. 25, no. 1., January-February 2004.
- Kaveri Subrahmanyam "Youth and Media: Opportunities for Development or Lurking Dangers? Children, Adolescents, and the Media," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, August 2003.

Full Text: COPYRIGHT 2010 Greenhaven Press, a part of Gale, Cengage Learning

Source Citation (MLA 8th Edition)

Castronova, Edward. "Researchers Have Not Proven That Media Violence Merits Policy Changes." *Is Media Violence a Problem?*, edited by Stefan Kiesbye, Greenhaven Press, 2010. At Issue. *Gale In Context: Opposing Viewpoints*, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EJ3010187227/OVIC?u=rock77357&sid=OVIC&xid=911d75b1>. Accessed 15 Sept. 2020. Originally published as "Media Violence, Aggression, and Policy," www.terranova.blogs.com, 25 May 2009.

Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010187227