

Violence in the Media
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The never-ending debate about media violence has been fueled by one unanswerable question: “Does watching violence cause someone to become violent? The reason we’ve gotten nowhere on this issue for 40 years is because this is the wrong question to ask about violence in the media.

The real question should be: “What is the long-term impact on . . . millions of children . . . bombarded with very powerful visual and verbal messages demonstrating violence as the preferred way to solve problems. . . ?”

When Deborah Prothrow-Stith, M.D., dean of Harvard University’s School of Public Health, begins one of her eloquent speeches on the growing crisis of violence as a public health issue in society, she often recounts the story of a young gunshot victim being treated in a Boston hospital emergency room. He expressed surprise that his wound actually hurt.

“I thought, boy, he’s really stupid, anybody knows that if you get shot, it’s going to hurt. But it dawned on me that what he sees on television is that when the superhero gets shot in the arm, he uses that arm to hold onto a truck going 85 miles an hour around a corner. He overcomes the driver and shoots a couple of hundred people while he’s at it.”

The Impact of Media Violence on Behavior

For decades, media writers, directors and producers have been trying to tell us that the violent content of the media they create also doesn’t hurt—that is, that despite its glamour and impact, it plays no role in making this a more violent society.

They may have had a case earlier in this century, when portrayals of media violence were less believable, but today the proliferation of realistic-looking mayhem, assault and death makes for a totally different situation. One expert believes that of the 25,000 murders committed in the United States every year (the greatest number of any industrialized country), at least half are due to the influence and desensitizing effects of media violence. At minimum, media violence may be most influential in modeling the use of deadly force as the primary, if not the only, way to solve problems and resolve interpersonal conflict.

Other Factors

Many blame media for the rise in violence, but of course that’s not the whole story. It’s also clear that overcrowding, pervasive life-long poverty, hunger, joblessness and drug addiction—as well as the ready availability of guns—also contribute to our skyrocketing homicide rate. But the media connection can no longer be ignored.

Some of the details of this connection might be questioned. Maybe the numbers could be debated. But the fact that a connection exists is hard to dispute. Which leads us to an inescapable conclusion: Something must be done.

For years, like other communicators, I believed that tolerating some things I didn’t like in—including depictions of violence—was the price we paid for a free and open public discourse.

Taking Action

Of course, our First Amendment protections are still important, but so are the thousands of lives being lost every year. The issue, I believe, is no longer one of protecting free speech, but of protecting human life; it is not a question of censoring ideas, but of changing behaviors that are endangering the health and safety of every citizen, young and old. . . .