CHAPTER

11

Regulating Media Violence: Why, How, and by Whom?

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> My professional response today is that the broadcasters should be put on notice.... It is clear to me that the causal relationship between [exposure to] televised violence and antisocial behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action *... there comes a time when the data are sufficient to justify action. That time has come.*
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> —Jesse Steinfeld, Surgeon General of the United States, March 21, 1972
> (U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, 1972, pp. 26–29)

It was 30 years ago when the then Surgeon General of the United States made these statements before Senator John Pastore's Subcommittee on Communications. The statement resonated with many researchers and policymakers who had been, at that time, investigating the effects of media violence for over 20 years. It was stimulated by the release of the Surgeon General's massive five-volume report on television and social behavior (Comstock, Murray, & Rubinstein, 1972) with a summary volume on television violence and aggression (Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee, 1972). This report contained both reviews of prior research and the results of specific projects funded by the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee. It seemed to be well received by the senators, although, like most research, it

was minimized and played down by the network executives who testified at the time. Nevertheless, those executives made seemingly concessionary statements that they would work on the problem. However, the sad fact is that despite what the Surgeon General said at that time, very little has been done in the way of reducing and regulating media violence over the subsequent 30 years. Children are exposed to as much or more violence in the media than ever. Although the case for the effects of media violence has grown stronger, producers are as reluctant as ever to admit that violence could be having any effect on children; and, although it speaks out against media violence, the government seems just about as reluctant as ever to do anything about it. In this chapter, we try to address why that is the case and what could and should have been done up to now and in the future.

MEDIA VIOLENCE STIMULATES AGGRESSION

Let us begin with a brief summary of some important facts about the effects of media violence on children. Over the past 50 years, a body of literature has emerged that strongly supports the conclusion that media violence viewing is one factor contributing to the development of aggression. By *aggression,* we mean serious interpersonal acts intended to harm the other person. By *media violence,* we mean visual portrayals of one person behaving physically aggressively against another. The majority of empirical studies over the past 50 years have focused on the effects of watching violence in television and film dramas (Huesmann, Moise, & Podolski, 1997), although studies on video games and music videos started to appear in the last decade (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Johnson, Adams, & Ashburn, 1995). In any case, the total number of empirical studies now approaches 400 or more. Many are experimental studies in which cause and effect can be unambiguously determined. These almost uniformly show that watching media violence causes the child viewer to behave more aggressively immediately afterward (e.g. Bjorkqvist, 1985). Many are static observational studies. These almost uniformly show a positive correlation between media violence viewing and aggression (e.g., Belson, 1978; McLeod, Atkin, & Chaffee, 1972). A few are longitudinal studies, and they generally show that early childhood exposure to media violence predicts later childhood and even adult aggression and violence, even when other relevant potential causal factors are controlled (e.g. Huesmann, Moise, Podolski, & Eron, 2003). These studies have been cogently summarized in a number of reviews and meta-analyses (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Andison, 1977; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Huesmann & Miller, 1994). Taken together, they indicate that exposure to media violence is not only related to childhood aggression; it is one factor stimulating childhood aggression.

A substantial body of psychological theory has developed explaining the processes through which exposure to violence in the mass media could cause both short- and long-term increases in a child's aggressive and violent behavior (Bandura, 1977; Berkowitz, 1993; Eron, 1963; Huesmann, 1988, 1998; Zillmann, 1979). Long-term effects with children are now generally believed to be primarily due to long-term *ob-*

servational learning of cognitions (schemas, beliefs, and biases) supporting aggression (Berkowitz, 1993; Huesmann, 1988, 1998), although habituation of negative emotional responses to violence—which makes violence more palatable *(desensitization)*—may also play a role. Short-term effects with adults and children are recognized as primarily due to *priming* (Huesmann, 1998), *excitation transfer* (Zillmann, 1983), or *observational learning (imitation) of specific behaviors* (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961). Most researchers of aggression agree that severe aggressive and violent behavior seldom occurs unless there is a convergence of multiple predisposing and precipitating factors such as neurophysiological abnormalities, poor childrearing, socioeconomic deprivation, poor peer relations, attitudes and beliefs supporting aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, frustration and provocation, and other factors. The evidence is already substantial that exposure to media violence is one such long-term predisposing and short-term precipitating factor. Exposure to media violence is only one of many factors that contribute to a youth's risk of behaving violently, but it is a significant factor in raising that risk in many children.

TRENDS IN AMOUNT OF MEDIA VIOLENCE

Given these facts, many of which were apparent in 1972, one might wonder whether the amount of violence in the mass media has declined in recent years. Unfortunately, the answer is no. For instance, the Cultural Indicators Projects, in examining images on television since 1967, demonstrated the remarkable stability in violent aspects of TV programming for almost 3 decades, with an average of more than 70% of programs featuring some forms of violence (Signorielli, 1991). Furthermore, it was found that this number has been even higher for children's weekend programming. Researchers have reported that 9 of 10 programs have included violence, at an average rate of 22 violent acts per hour (Gerbner & Signorielli, 1990; Signorielli, 1991). Although these studies produced reliable and robust findings, they suffered from two major limitations. First, Gerbner and colleagues focused on programming from major broadcast networks only; and second, they used an intact week sampling technique that could possibly have distorted the findings (Wilson et al., 2002). These issues have been addressed by the National Television Violence Study (NTVS), led by a group of researchers from the University of California–Santa Barbara who created and content analyzed one of the most comprehensive samples of television programming in the United States. They sampled approximately 2,700 hours of programming each year (1994–1998) across 23 broadcast and cable channels (Wilson et al., 1997, 1998). A major finding of the study (Wilson et al., 2002) was that TV programming targeted to children is significantly more likely to feature violence, with 69% of children's and 57% of nonchildren's programs containing some form of violence. The study also revealed that violent characters in children's shows are more likely to receive rewards or praise for their actions than are similar characters in other types of shows (32% vs. 21%, respectively). Furthermore, children's programs are less likely to portray the serious consequences of violence, like physical harm or pain, than are other

nonchildren's shows. Another recent report on the study (Wilson, Colvin, & Smith, 2002) suggested that younger perpetrators of onscreen violence, compared to their older counterparts, are more frequently depicted as attractive, are less likely to be punished, and their violent acts are less likely to result in negative consequences to the victims. Moreover, the study showed that young perpetrators portrayed in such fashion hold prominent positions in children's programming.

WHAT REALLY NEEDS TO BE REGULATED

So far we have summarized the research demonstrating that media violence does indeed stimulate lasting propensities toward aggressive and violent behavior in many youth, and the research demonstrating that TV is still filled with a lot of violence of different types. Let us turn now to the question of what the body of research suggests really needs to be regulated about media violence in order to reduce its potential effects. There are several important empirical facts that help guide our answers to this question.

Children's Exposure Is of Greatest Concern

There are two realities that lead to the conclusion that we need to be much more concerned about children's exposure to media violence than about adults' exposure. First, one of the best-known facts about aggressive and violent behavior is that the origins of serious adult aggression can almost always be found in childhood experiences. There is no more powerful predictor of adult aggression and violence than childhood aggression (Huesmann & Miller, 1994). Whatever contributes to increases in a child's aggression is also increasing the likelihood that that child will behave more aggressively as an adult. Why? Cognitive structures—scripts, world schemas, normative beliefs—are being formed in young children that will determine the child's habitual behaviors and personality for a long time. These cognitions are easily molded in the child through observational learning and conditioning but, once the cognitions have crystallized, they become resistant to change. Thus, on the average, a more aggressive child grows up to be a more aggressive adult.

Second, research indicates that the most lasting effects of exposure to media violence occur with children. In their meta-analysis of 217 key studies, Paik and Comstock (1994) reported that the largest effects of media violence occurred with preschoolers and the smallest effects occurred with adults. Furthermore, longitudinal studies that have examined the same people in young childhood and later in teenage years or adulthood have generally found much stronger correlations between childhood viewing and childhood aggression than between young adult viewing and young adult aggression (Eron, Huesmann, Lefkowitz, & Walder, 1972; Huesmann et al., 2003; Huesmann & Eron, 1986; Milavsky, Kessler, Stipp, & Rubens, 1982). Additionally, some of these longitudinal studies have shown stronger correlations from early childhood exposure to later young adult aggression than from adult violence viewing to adult aggression (Lefkowitz, Eron, Walder, &

Huesmann, 1977). At the same time, experimental studies investigating short-term effects on hostile behavioral responses to provocation or short-term effects on expressed aggressive attitudes and beliefs seem to show effects for young adults that are similar in size to effects on children (Huesmann & Miller, 1994; Malamuth & Donnerstein, 1982; Paik & Comstock, 1994). From a theoretical standpoint, this is not surprising: The short-term processes of priming and excitation transfer increase the expression of aggressive ideas and the use of aggressive scripts in adults as well as in children. It is the encoding of new aggressive scripts, hostile world schemas, and normative beliefs approving of aggression that occurs more readily in childhood, with long-lasting effects (Huesmann, 1998).

The conclusion is that exposure to media violence may increase risk for aggressive behavior in the short run for both adults and children, but that the greatest concern about long term effects should be reserved for children. This leads to the conclusion that regulating children's exposure is much more important than regulating adults' exposure. Media violence has long-term effects on children that pose a public health threat. Effects on adults should not be dismissed as nonexistent, but they tend to be short term. Consequently, regulating only children's exposure could have significant positive social consequences while avoiding at least some of the moral and philosophical issues surrounding regulating adult exposure.

Some Children Are More at Risk

As far as empirical research has shown, media violence affects all children to some extent. The frequently voiced claim that only children who are predisposed to be aggressive are affected does not hold up under scrutiny. Of course, because many different things increase aggressiveness, a child who has many such risk factors is more likely to display aggression in response to media violence. However, that does not mean that media violence affects such a child more. In experimental studies of short-term effects, there is no published evidence that only already-aggressive children are affected. In longitudinal studies, analyses that separate high- and low-aggressive children show that both types of children become more aggressive when they are exposed to high diets of violent TV (Eron et al., 1972). Nevertheless, there are a number of factors that seem to put some children more at risk in one way or another.

High TV Viewers.   Children who watch more TV are inevitably exposed to more violence on TV because of the pervasive presence of violence on television. Thus, high viewers are more at risk. There are a wide variety of individual factors that may influence some young children to watch more TV than others.

Unpopular Children.   There is some evidence that unpopular children watch more television (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). It may be that television provides rewards for them that they cannot obtain in their social life, or it may be that watching a lot of television removes them from social contacts and makes them less popular.

Less Intelligent Children.   Low IQ and low achievement are even stronger correlates of amount of TV viewing and exposure to TV violence (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). However, as with unpopularity, the direction of the relation is unclear and probably bidirectional. Spending time watching TV instead of reading and studying undoubtedly contributes to lower achievement, but lower-IQ children may also turn to watching TV to obtain vicarious rewards and escape the failures they encounter in academic pursuits.

Children from Lower-SES (Socioeconomic) Families.   Children from lower-SES families on the average tend to view more television and see more television violence (Anderson, Mead, & Sullivan, 1986; Comstock & Paik, 1991). This added exposure increases the risk that media violence will have a substantial effect on the children. Television also has a more central role in lower-SES households.

Children Without Parental Supervision.   Children in one-parent families watch more television and television violence (Webster, Pearson, & Webster, 1986). The less time parents have available, the more time the young child watches TV, often alone without an adult to comment on or discuss what is being shown. Mediating comments by adults are one factor that can reduce the effect of media violence on a child (Nathanson, 1999); hence, lack of the possibility of mediation increases risk.

Do risk factors for viewing explain the relation between viewing and aggression? A legitimate question about all of these factors that increase the risk of a child being exposed to media violence is whether these factors "account for" the relation between TV violence viewing and aggression. The simple answer is, "No!" Although indeed most of these factors are also correlated with aggression, statistical analyses (see Eron et al., 1972; Huesmann et al., 2003; Huesmann & Eron, 1986) show that they do not account for the relation between TV violence viewing and aggression.

Some Characteristics of Violent Shows Increase Concern

Independent of the specific child viewer, there are also a number of characteristics of a violent program that seem to increase the risk of it having an effect on the viewer. The evolved theory explaining why media violence affects children's aggression suggests that many of these characteristics should be important, and their importance has also been supported by empirical studies. Regulation could be targeted at these characteristics rather than violence as a whole.

A substantial literature has evolved on what attracts children to specific television shows (see Comstock & Paik, 1991). Visual and auditory form, subject matter, character, and genre all affect whether children will watch a program, and children must attend to a program to learn from it. Unfortunately, violent programs tend naturally to have elements that attract children's attention. Also unfortunately, attention to a program is all that is needed psychologically for the short-term processes of priming and excitation transfer to come into play. However, the magnitude of the long-term effects of exposure to violence should and does seem to depend on some more subtle characteristics of the presentation.

Does the Child Identify with the Perpetrator of the Violence?   When observing a violent scene, a child might identify with the victim or the perpetrator. The child is more likely to encode scripts for behaving violently and beliefs supporting violence if that child identifies with the perpetrator (Bandura, 1986). Thus, highly charismatic, heroic, powerful, attractive characters who behave violently (e.g., Indiana Jones and Dirty Harry) are more likely to teach aggression to an observing child.

Is the Violence Portrayed as Justified?   A child is also more likely to encode observed scripts including violent acts if the act is presented as justified (Berkowitz, 1993). Was the aggressor provoked? Does the victim deserve to be attacked? Of course, the typical crime drama or western showing criminals being shot or beaten by avenging citizens or lawmen (e.g., Dustin Hoffman in *Straw Dogs,* Charles Bronson in *Death Wish,* or Spenser Tracy in *Bad Day at Black Rock*) falls perfectly into this category. Retribution themes are common in violent dramas, and they convey the impression that violence is justified.

Is the Violence Rewarded?   In some violent scenes, the perpetrator of violence receives rewards or accolades for what he or she has done. The male hero saves the world by eliminating the terrorists (violently, of course) and is rewarded with adulation and often the attentions of a beautiful woman (e. g., Arnold Schwarzenegger in *True Lies*). Research has shown that impressionable young viewers are more likely to imitate aggressive scripts they observe when the violence in them is rewarded in this manner (Bandura, 1986). Therefore, these scenes are of more concern than even more violent scenes in which the perpetrator meets a disastrous end.

Is the Plot Perceived as Realistic?   Finally, research has shown that children are more likely to be influenced by violent scenes they perceive as "telling about life like it really is" than scenes that seem divorced from reality (Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Of course, the perception of reality is in the beholder as much as in the drama. For example, cartoons may be perceived as very realistic by young children, even though most adults see them as complete fantasy.

SUMMARY OF CONCERNS

Thus far we have concluded that regulation of children's exposure to media violence is most important because media violence affects children more and the effects last longer. In fact, regulation of adults' exposure may not have much societal benefit because the effects on adults are mostly short term. Unfortunately, the evidence indicates that all children are affected, although children who are high TV viewers, are more aggressive, are less intelligent, are from lower-SES families, and have less parental supervision may be more affected. At the same time, the evidence indicates that not all violence is of equal concern. Repeated exposures to very graphic, bloody violence may maximize the emotional desensitization of the child to violence. However, the learning of cognitive scripts, schemas, and beliefs that

promote violence is quite probably maximized by exposing a child repeatedly to charismatic heroes, with whom the child identifies, who use justified violence to save the world from "bad guys," and who are rewarded for their actions.

HISTORY OF REGULATION OF VIOLENCE

Given this background, let us now review the history of attempts to regulate exposure to televisual media perceived to be "bad" for the public. Ever since the days of nickelodeons, children have been among the most frequent and devoted moviegoers. In the 1920s, the advent of sound technology coupled with more sophisticated scripting, camera work, and editing techniques brought the movie-viewing experience to a new level and started raising societal alarms about potential impact of motion pictures (particularly "sexy" pictures) on children. Intervention soon ensued by the industry, which addressed the issue (probably for commercial reasons) by introducing matinee screenings of selected movies for children, usually on Saturday mornings and early afternoons (Paik, 2001). However, the American public had to wait for 40 more years to see any further action taken in this respect, although the first congressional hearing on television and juvenile delinquency took place as early as 1954 (Hamilton, 1998b; Signorielli, 1991). Indeed, it was not until 1968 that the Motion Pictures Association of America (MPAA), headed by Jack Valenti, in partnership with National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) bowed to public pressure and created the first comprehensive movie rating system. The aim of this self-imposed system was to provide "advance cautionary warnings" about movies (Valenti, 2000) and help parents make decisions about whether or not their children should be allowed to watch any particular movie shown in theatres. Ever since the introduction, the MPAA ratings (www.mpaa.org) have classified movies into categories: G (general audiences/all ages admitted), PG (parental guidance suggested), R (restricted), and NC-17 (no one 17 and under admitted; MPAA, 2002). The category of PG-13 (parents strongly cautioned) was added a decade or so after the first four classifications, to further clarify things for parents.

Those first U.S. Senate hearings on media violence in 1954 did have some immediate effects, however. It was during them that violence on television and movies first received serious public and political attention. Writing in *Public Opinion Quarterly* at that time, distinguished researcher Paul Lazarsfeld (1955), who testified at the hearings, reported that there was little scientific knowledge about the effects of televised violence on youth behavior, and it was a social topic that needed to be investigated. Those first hearings started a trend of government hearings interacting with government-sponsored research initiatives on television effects on behavior that continued to the end of the 20th century. Schramm, Lyle, and Parker (1961) published their milestone report *Television in the Lives of Our Children* shortly afterward. This was followed in 1969 by the *Violence and the Media* report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (Baker & Ball, 1969).

Then, just a few years after the movie ratings were introduced, in 1972 the Surgeon General presented the first comprehensive and well-documented report on television violence and its effects on social behavior. The report was commissioned

by the federal government in 1969, when the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior was appointed to deal with this issue. Interestingly, in the 12-member committee, academic researchers were outnumbered by representatives of the broadcasting industry by 5 to 3; moreover, some of the most prominent media effects researchers (including Albert Bandura) were vetoed off the committee by the broadcasters (Cooper, 1996; Newton, 1996). This is probably one of the main reasons why the committee's final conclusions about the effects of television violence were perceived by the scientific community as being watered down, and by the general public as confusing (Cooper, 1996; Newton, 1996). Researchers were particularly disappointed and frustrated because scientific evidence for a causal link between TV violence and aggression was indeed very strong. Still, the report did make a difference as the TV networks' behavior came under closer public scrutiny following the report's release. For instance, in 1972 the FCC received about 2,000 complaints regarding violent and sexual content; by 1974 the number of complaints was 25,000 (Cooper, 1996). In addition, the report stimulated the widely publicized Senate Commerce Committee hearings on television violence chaired by Senator Pastore, at which network executives appeared. Although they denied that media violence could be having any effect, they promised to be concerned about it. Perhaps more important, the Surgeon General's report stimulated a number of research studies investigating the effects of televised violence, some of which were included in the 1982 National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) report.

The 1982 NIMH report has been called "the last great federally funded study of media violence" (Newton, 1996, p. 36), and its major conclusions were more damaging to the television industry than were the conclusions from the previous report by the Surgeon General. Most important, the report claimed that research findings suggested a causal link between television violence and aggressive behavior, an accusation strongly denied by the broadcasting industry (Newton, 1996). The timing of the report's release was also a subject of considerable controversy as it coincided with the start of a new TV season, but the NIMH stressed that the timing coincidence had not been planned, and that the report was to be published then only after someone had leaked it to *The Washington Post* (Cooper, 1996). The ABC network responded to the accusations by producing a study that tried to refute every major conclusion of the report, but largely failed as its study was strongly criticized by the research community and U.S. Surgeon General (Cooper, 1996).

Although there was no immediate congressional or governmental action as a consequence of the NIMH report, it probably signaled the start of an increasing political concern with the issue. By the late 1980s, that concern became apparent in Congress through the actions of Senator Paul Simon in the Senate and Representative Ed Markey in the House. Hearings became more frequent, and the sentiment expressed by more and more members of Congress, reflecting the testimony, became more proregulation. Senator Simon called on the industry to regulate itself, and sponsored legislation adopted in 1990 that granted the industry an antitrust exemption to permit it to cooperate in reducing violence on television. However, the industry did

nothing, and over the next few years public consensus for action emerged. Not only did parent and children's television action groups make their opinions felt, but professional health organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and the American Academy of Pediatrics weighed in on the side of action. As Kunkel and Wilcox (2001) reported, the industry, "sensing a shift in the political winds, finally agreed to a formal response ... (but it) proved to be 'too little, too late' to avoid further government intervention" (p. 592).

First, the Children's Television Act of 1990 was passed, which limited the amount of advertising in children's programming and mandated broadcasting of some educational programming for young viewers. At the same time, the development of V-chip technology, which would enable viewers to block certain programs that they found objectionable, was announced (Newton, 1996). By the mid-1990s, Representative Markey had introduced legislation mandating both the incorporation of V-chips into new televisions and a ratings system. President Clinton endorsed the proposal and the legislation, which was incorporated into the 1996 Telecom Act with an aim of providing "technology for parents to control the viewing of programming they believe is inappropriate for their children, and for other purposes" (Parental Choice in Television Act of 1995, 104th Congress).

From the perspective of those most concerned about violence, the "fly in the ointment" of this proposal was the need for a rating system. The ratings for each program could be transmitted as part of the coded stream normally used for "closed captioning." However, the act, attempting to skirt constitutional issues, gave the television industry the right to devise its own rating system. The industry, following the approach used for movies, introduced an age-based ratings system despite published evidence that age-based ratings attract children to mature programs (Bushman & Stack, 1996) whereas content-based ratings for violence do not. The new parental guidelines system was unveiled in late 1996, and was quickly implemented by the major broadcast network and cable operators. The new guidelines were modeled on the old MPAA rating system with some minor changes (i.e., children's programming and general audience programming were categorized separately). Thus, programs designed for children were labeled as either TV-Y (all children) or TV-Y7 (directed to older children), whereas programs designed for the entire audience received one of the four labels: TV-G (general audience), TV-PG (parental guidance suggested), TV-14 (parents strongly cautioned), and TV-MA (mature audiences only; TV Parental Guidelines, 2002; http://www.tvguidelines.org). The ratings were strongly criticized by the academics, interest groups, and politicians who supported a system that would provide more information about the content of a program, including levels of violence, sex, and adult language. The system was amended by the industry in late 1997 to include content descriptors: FV for fantasy violence, V for violence, S for sexual situations, L for language, and D for suggestive dialogue; however, the NBC network refused to implement the new ratings (Hamilton, 1998b).

At present, Congress and the FCC, with their general reluctance to directly regulate speech on the basis of content, seem at least partially satisfied with the current voluntary ratings systems for motion pictures and television. Yet, it is

impossible to dispute the fact that media violence has been one of the most hotly debated issues on the congressional floor and has been frequently mentioned in presidential candidate speeches. However, an empirical study by Hoerrner (1999)—examining the relationship among social, economic, and political factors and congressional actions regarding television violence—demonstrated that legislators' actions are generally more symbolic than substantive. The author reported that there is no relationship between the amount of violence in the media and related congressional activity in any given year, even when 1- or 2-year delays for legislative action are taken into account. On the contrary, Hoerrner (1999) suggested that the status of media violence as a national issue, coupled with its ability to generate press coverage and boost name recognition for those legislators who are planning to seek higher office, are among the main factors predicting congressional action.

Indeed, although the subject of media violence has been covered extensively in the national press in the last 50 years, the coverage itself has left much to be desired (Anderson & Bushman, 2001). Recent consolidations of the media industry—via mergers, acquisitions, and takeovers—have created media conglomerates that have commercial interests across several different industries, including television, motion pictures, video games, and newspapers. There is little doubt that such market conditions are not very conducive for impartial reporting about the effects of media violence. Bushman and Anderson (2001), on the basis of a content analysis of press reports, concluded that there is a growing disparity between scientific findings and news reports about the effects of media violence. Although research evidence gathered since 1975 has repeatedly demonstrated the existence of a link between media violence and aggression, with the size of this relationship increasing over the years, Bushman and Anderson's analysis shows that news reports have changed from suggesting a weak relationship to a moderate relationship and back to a weak (or even nonexistent) relationship between media violence and aggression.

LOCI FOR INTERVENTIONS AND REGULATION

The previous summary of attempts to regulate violence has focused on governmental actions spurred by public discontent. However, there are other loci for interventions to regulate violence that need to be considered. Furthermore, none of the regulatory attempts so far have addressed the issue that different kinds of violence may have different effects.

One way to categorize the loci for regulatory interventions is whether they are aimed at the producer of the message being transmitted in the media or at the receiver of the message being transmitted. For example, regulation through ratings can be viewed as involving both the transmitter who must provide the ratings (e.g., movie ratings or ratings a V-chip can read) and the receivers who must alter their behaviors on the basis of the ratings. Let us now examine some other potential loci for interventions involving the transmitters of violent messages.

Artists and Producers

Of course, violent content in dramas begins with the artist and producer. Good stories often involve violence, and the argument is compelling that no one is in a better position than the artists and producers to determine how necessary or how gratuitous a violent scene is. The presentation form that an artist selects, the visuals that accompany it, the dialogue, and the implications are all chosen to achieve a particular artistic effect. Artistic license means that the artist should generally retain control over these elements, but compromises are always made to balance taste with effect and to create the emotional reactions the artist and producers want. Compromises are also often made to avoid offending an audience to the extent that its members won't watch the production. In the televisual industry, ratings are the bottom line for economic success, and a production that drives viewers away will be unsuccessful. The producers of movies, television programs, and even electronic games are always balancing the tastes of the targeted audience against artistic desires, often in both directions. Sometimes productions add titillating material to increase ratings. Other times productions avoid politically incorrect material that they fear might stimulate negative reactions. Most major production organizations already have staff that regularly monitor and edit production material, including evaluating sexual and violent material (Potter, 1999), although it is not clear that they distinguish appropriately among different types of violence that might affect children. They appear to be more concerned with not offending adult viewers. The point is that the argument that artists and producers should not consider the issue of the impact of violence in their productions is contradicted by the fact that they already consider the social impact of all sorts of other sensitive content in their productions, ranging from nudity and sexuality to race to religion. Thus, from a regulatory perspective, the problem becomes one of convincing artists and producers that violence has detrimental effects on the audience and such violence might offend a significant segment of the audience.

The majority of artists and producers probably have not yet been convinced either that violence really is detrimental to the audience or that the audience will be sufficiently offended by violence such that they will not watch. In fact, many seem to believe that violence attracts young audiences (Potter, 1999). Consequently, although many artists are social activists on issues ranging from the environment to land mines to tobacco, they do not see violence reduction as a social concern. Of course, there are some who do, but until a more general consensus emerges among artists that violence in the mass media has adverse effects on a substantial part of the audience, it is unrealistic to expect them to regulate violence substantially.

Commercial Sponsors of Television

Another possible powerful source of regulatory influence for violence on commercial television is the "sponsor." Sponsors advertise because they want to sell their products, and, if it becomes apparent that sales will not be helped by the

sponsorship because of counteracting negative effects, they will withdraw their sponsorship. Again, the crucial missing link here is that, on average, sponsors have probably not been convinced either that violence is detrimental to a significant part of the audience or that the audience will be offended enough by violence that they will not buy the product. However, research evidence is only recently emerging that may help change sponsors' perspectives on this point. Bushman (1998) showed that violent segments in shows reduce the audience's memory for commercial messages, probably by focusing their attention away from the commercials. Additionally, there is good reason to believe that the association of products with the negative emotions stimulated by viewing violence will cause negative feelings to be "primed" in the future by the sight of the product (Berkowitz, 1993; Huesmann, 1998). When coupled with a growing awareness of public concerns about media violence, these kinds of findings may make sponsors wary of paying for programs containing violence. In fact, the producers of violence seem to be well aware of this possibility and have opposed content-based ratings for fear of losing their sponsors.

Public Advocacy Groups and Professional Organizations

Another potential locus of regulatory efforts directed against the transmission of violent messages could be public pressure groups such as the national Parent Teachers Association or Action for Children's Television, and professional organizations dealing with mental health issues. Many of these groups have played a significant role in swaying sentiment among politicians to do something about violence. Their success in influencing artists, producers, and sponsors is less apparent. Most of these groups, as well as the individual members in the groups, express no doubts about the detrimental effects of media violence. However, these public interest groups are sometimes not as well informed as desirable about the subtleties of the psychological processes involved or about whom the at-risk populations are. Additionally, they may be misinformed about the kinds of violence that is of most concern. This sometimes leads to some misdirected efforts by these groups, which detracts from the impact of all their efforts. When a group takes a questionable stance on one part of an issue, its credibility on all parts suffers.

A related issue is that a large segment of the general public from which many of the advocacy groups draw their members often display "third-person effects" with regard to this issue (Hoffner, Plotkin, Buchanan, & Anderson, 2001). Many people are absolutely convinced that media violence is having a detrimental effect on some children, but not on their own children. Furthermore, many believe that there can't be anything wrong with the kind of media violence they like to watch—only with the media violence they find repulsive. This thinking leads to the kinds of statements that Senator Dole once made in the midst of a presidential race when he stated that there needed to be fewer violent films and more films like *True Lies*, which in fact is a film filled with the kind of violence that many people find most enjoyable.

Parents

Let us turn now to potential loci of regulation that are intended to directly affect the receiver of the violent message. The first of these are the child's parents. Limiting the child's exposure to violence in the media would clearly reduce the risk of media violence affecting the child. This point is often made forcefully by industry spokespeople, and the validity of the point is clear. Parents have a strong influence on the child during the critical early years when television habits are being formed and when television content can affect the child most. Children of parents who watch more television also watch more television themselves (Comstock & Paik, 1991; Huesmann & Eron, 1986). Furthermore, apart from controlling overall viewing, research suggests that parents could also have an impact by interpreting the media content for the child. As described earlier, the less the child identifies with the perpetrator, the less the child perceives the violence as justified or normative, and the less the child perceives the violence on TV as realistic, then the less the violence is likely to have a lasting influence on the child. Parents have a unique opportunity to intervene on these dimensions. Nathanson and Cantor (Nathanson, 1999; Nathanson & Cantor, 2000) in fact showed that even minimal parental mediation of violent messages can reduce the effects of the violent messages.

At the same time, the realities of 21st-century family life must be considered when regulation and intervention strategies involving parents are considered. In the majority of families with young children, both parents are now working. Both parents are under time pressure each day. Consequently, being able to closely supervise a child's television viewing habits is not easy for most parents. In fact, less than 10% of most children's viewing time consists of coviewing by parents and children (Comstock & Paik, 1991). Active mediation requires even more effort by a parent. Furthermore, as children reach the school-age years and media contacts occur more and more at peers' houses and in peer groups, the ability of the parent to monitor exposure and mediate is reduced still further. Unfortunately, those children who are least likely to have their media exposure monitored and mediated by a parent tend to be those who would be most at risk for aggression in any case, such as children with low SES, low IQ, and/or from broken families.

Schools

Partially because of these difficulties with parental regulation, those people interested in regulating children's exposure to media on the reception side have turned more toward schools as a possible locus of regulation. The idea is that the schools would somehow prepare children so that they are not influenced as much by the violent messages they are bound to encounter. Two general approaches have been advocated for use within schools: media literacy training, and social-cognitive training.

Media Literacy Training.   A large number of programs have been developed for media literacy training over the past several decades in both the United States

and in many other countries (Brown, 2001). They have ranged from attempts to improve critical thinking about media programs through discussion and learning about production (Dorr, Graves, & Phelps, 1980), to attempting to increase children's cognitive gains from TV by teaching children how it works (Singer & Singer, 1983), to trying to help children think logically about TV and distinguish fantasy from reality (Singer & Singer, 1983). State-sponsored and federally sponsored programs have become common. The most common themes in these programs seem to be that teaching children to think critically about what they see will enable them to learn more of what they should learn from TV, learn less of what they should not learn, and believe less of what they should not believe. Most proponents of media literacy programs believe that such training should reduce the negative impact of media violence on young viewers. However, the theoretical basis for such a belief is rarely specified in such programs and, even where it has been specified, it has rarely been rigorously evaluated for success. Although some elements of many media literacy programs (e.g., teaching that the dramas do not tell about life as it really is) theoretically could be expected to reduce the extent to which aggressive scripts, beliefs, and schemas are learned from watching violence, other elements of media literacy interventions could in fact be expected to promote the learning of aggression from observing dramas (e.g., teaching children to critically analyze and understand scripts of complex adult dramas).

The evaluations of media literacy programs that have been conducted to date generally do not provide an answer to the question of whether they reduce the impact of viewing violence (Brown, 2001). Most evaluations have assessed intermediate outcomes such as the ability of the child viewer to understand the narrative or to learn from it, and skills in media analysis. It is probably fair to say that no study to date has shown that media literacy training, per se, is effective in reducing the tendency of children to acquire aggressive scripts and beliefs from watching media violence.

Social Cognitive Interventions.   Social cognitive interventions are those that are intended to reduce the negative effects of media violence on the receiver by changing the receiver's cognitions. Proponents think of this approach to regulating the effects of media violence as similar to regulating diseases by vaccinating children against them. The goal is to instill in children beliefs, schemas, and attributional tendencies that make it less likely that the children will acquire aggressive scripts, schemas, or beliefs from observing other people behaving violently. A very few interventions of this type have been tested separately or as part of larger interventions intended to prevent the development of violent tendencies in children. For example, Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, and Fischer (1983) showed that a counterattitudinal intervention in which children's beliefs about the appropriateness of aggression, the realism of violence on TV, and the dangers of imitating the violence on TV were changed did engender reduced aggression in the treated group 1 year later compared to a control group. This intervention has also been included in two general interventions to prevent the development of aggression in young children, but with less success (Metropolitan Area Child Study Research Group,

2002). Certainly, more successful replications of this and similar approaches need to be conducted before one should count on such interventions as being an important part of a regulatory strategy.

OBSTACLES AND OBJECTIONS TO REGULATION

We have reviewed a variety of approaches to regulating children's exposure to violence in the televisual media, ranging from artists' actions to government action to parents' and schools' actions. All of the regulatory approaches discussed in this chapter have obstacles to their successful utilization. For each type and loci of the regulation, some obstacles are more important than others. In this section we discuss two main obstacles that seem to pose more of a problem: the economics of violence and constitutional issues about regulation.

Economics of Violence

As described earlier in this chapter, about 60% of television programs contain some violence. It is also clear that these programs are watched by many viewers. Although a majority of viewers may well believe that there is too much violence on television, a substantial portion of American viewers watch the violence (Hamilton, 1998). A better understanding of the economics of this situation and its implications for regulation can be obtained if we discuss the arguments about why so many people are exposed to media violence.

One common argument is simply that violence "sells"—that is, that violence per se attracts viewers. Some psychological theories support this view. Researchers know that children are attracted to fast-paced shows, with rapid changes of scenes, rapid changes in music and sound, and suspense or other factors that produce emotional arousal and relief (Comstock & Paik, 1991; Miron, Bryant, & Zillmann, 2001). Also, cognitive justification theory proposed by Huesmann (1982) suggests that viewers who already are more aggressive might prefer to watch violence in order to justify their behavior to themselves. However, there is only very weak longitudinal empirical data indicating that aggressive children indeed turn to watching more violence. Furthermore, although many violent shows have high ratings, the average ratings are higher for prime-time nonviolent shows than for prime-time violent shows.

An alternative, more sophisticated view of the economics of violence was provided by Hamilton's (1998a) market-based model. He argued that there is a subset of viewers who do prefer violent programming, and producers compete for these viewers to varying degrees depending on the relative benefit of attracting them compared to other audiences. If advertisers value these violence-preferring viewers because of their demographics, then the amount of violence offered should also increase. The bottom line is that the amount of violence on TV should be a function of the income generated because of the audience attracted and sponsors' interest in them minus the costs associated with producing the violent program. For example, the highest consumers of media violence are people aged 18 to 34 years, and these people are also one

of the most attractive segments of the population to advertisers. Yet, advertising on violent prime-time shows costs less per thousand viewers than does advertising on nonviolent prime-time shows. Additionally, violent shows have higher expected profits from the foreign and residual sales of the program than do nonviolent shows. These all increase the economic value of violent programs to the producers.

One of the most important facts about Hamilton's model (1998a) is that he distinguished between the true costs of producing violence, including the "externalities" (costs to society of having the violence broadcast and having viewers influenced by it), and the costs to the producer alone. One of his major arguments was that violence appears economically attractive to producers because they do not consider the externalities in their profit equation. The public health costs of media violence are such an externality to the producers. So, too, would be whether children watch or don't watch an adult violent show that is being rated only for adult viewing. On the other side of the coin, Hamilton (1998a) argued that the costs to the public of regulating media violence or dealing with the violence engendered by the media are extremely high. For example, the cost and effort required of parents to monitor and mediate what their own child watches is very high and the benefits only accrue to that one child.

CONSTITUTIONAL OBSTACLES

In contrast to many other liberal democracies, the U.S. televisual environment has been shaped since its inception by two major economic and political conditions: the overwhelmingly commercial nature of broadcasting, and the First Amendment protection of free speech. Both of these features have had a crucial impact on the character of television programming, and have also influenced research on the effects of television, regulatory practices, and public debates about the relationship between the media and social behavior. Historically, the broadcast media have not enjoyed the same level of First Amendment protection as the print media have, mainly because of the perceived scarcity of the airwaves, which have been treated as a public good. However, new technological developments and cable television's increasingly ubiquitous reach have made the scarcity argument largely obsolete, which—coupled with the general trend toward deregulation—have produced an environment in which media violence may be even harder to curb.

Given all that, the V-chip seems like a step in the right direction, although its effects are likely to be limited by several factors, especially by the shortcomings of the ratings system and a relatively low adoption rate for the V-chip technology. In addition, concerns about the impact of the V-chip on free speech have been voiced by numerous individuals and organizations, and the technology has been labeled a "digital placebo" (Katz, 1999) and a "Big Brother" (ACLU, 1996). Whereas some have called the technology unconstitutional, others have complained only about certain aspects of the V-chip ratings system. For example, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has not objected to the V-chip technology itself, but it has instead opposed any governmental control over the technology and/or the ratings system

and has advocated development of independent private ratings systems and technology (ACLU, 1996). Still, scholars have argued that the V-chip ratings system may be constitutional, but the age-based ratings system may be declared unconstitutional (Spitzer, 1998); furthermore, the Supreme Court suggested in dicta that the V-chip technology may be constitutional (Ryan, 1999). The system can either be defended as being content neutral (i.e., providing information to consumers, similar to warning labels on cigarette packages and disclosure requirements for prescription drugs) or as a content-based regulation, which is narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling governmental interest (Ryan, 1999).

The First Amendment protagonists have treated the free speech guarantee as a proof that the government should not regulate speech at all, thus forgetting that the government is indeed allowed to regulate many forms of speech, including perjury, unlicensed medical advice, criminal solicitation, blackmail, verbal fraud, false advertising, and child pornography (Sunstein, 2001). Furthermore, the Supreme Court has continuously argued that the government may regulate obscene content (Ryan, 1999; Sunstein, 2001), and the FCC has generally followed the Miller test in making decisions about obscenity (*Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15, 1973). According to the FCC, material must meet a three-pronged test in order to qualify as obscene: An average person, applying contemporary community standards, must find that the material, taken as a whole, appeals to the prurient interest; the material must depict or describe, in a patently offensive way, sexual conduct specifically defined by applicable law; and the material, taken as a whole, must lack serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value (http://www.fcc.gov/eb/broadcast /obscind.html). It is quite clear that a similar test for judging violent content does not exist. Still, Saunders (1996) made an interesting argument about obscenity and media violence, suggesting that violence may be considered obscene too, and thus could be subjected to state regulation. He maintained that throughout legal history, obscenity laws failed to distinguish between sex and violence and that in legal contexts the word *obscene* started to be exclusively associated with sex only following an obsession with limiting sexual expression dating from Victorian times. Therefore, Saunders indicated that clear statutory procedures should be established (i.e., describing specific violent acts) in order to classify certain films as legally obscene, acknowledging that contemporary community standards regarding violence should play a decisive role in this process. Although this proposal may seem promising, it is unlikely that this form of regulation would indeed be effective because it would only deal with the most extreme and goriest forms of violence, whereas other forms would remain unchecked. This is particularly true for the types of onscreen violence that are most likely to influence children—that is, when the violent acts are committed by heroic and attractive characters and are portrayed as being justified and rewarded.

Overall, the Constitution does not seem to present insurmountable obstacles to *some* government regulation of *children's* exposure to violence. The courts have upheld some of the FCC's attempts to regulate speech. In general, the courts have cited three "unique attributes" of broadcasting in their defense of regulation: the scarcity of airwaves, the uniquely pervasive presence of broadcasting in the lives of all Ameri-

cans, and its unique accessibility by children, even by those who are too young to read (see Ryan, 1999). Currently, the federal law prohibits obscene broadcasts at all times (United States Code, 18 U.S.C. § 1464), whereas the FCC's rule restricts broadcasting of indecent material to the period of 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. (Code of Federal Regulations, 47 C.F.R. § 73.3999). In the last few years, the FCC has fined more than two dozen radio broadcasters for violating indecency laws, and complaints against TV broadcasters have also been examined. It should be noted, however, that similar restrictions do not apply to cable-only channels (FCC, 2002; for more information see http://www.fcc.gov/eb/broadcast/obscind.html). Interestingly, there are no federal laws regulating violent content, even though the case for harmfulness of media violence is unarguably stronger than for obscene, indecent, or profane material.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we began by reviewing the compelling evidence that exposure to media violence needs to be regulated. We presented evidence that regulating children's exposure is much more important than regulating adults' exposure. We also pointed out that many characteristics of the way violence is presented and the kind of violence being presented influence its "toxicity" to children, although most of the public and policymakers appear to be unaware of those factors. We also concluded that all children are at risk, although some children are more at risk than others. We then reviewed the history of governmental attempts to regulate media violence that culminated in the V-chip law and associated ratings. We pointed out that there are a number of other powerful sources that could contribute to regulating the transmission of violence or to mitigating the impact it might have on young viewers, and discussed the pros and cons of each. Finally, we concluded with a discussion of the economic and legal obstacles to successful regulation.

So, what is the regulatory solution that seems best—better parental control, more government control, training children not to be affected by media violence, better rating systems for violence, boycotting sponsors of violence? Some part of all of these may be needed. Each society needs to make decisions based on what is best for it. However, it is time for every society to take this problem seriously and to act on it. The future of our children and society is too precious for us not to act.

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