

VOLUME XI

THE INTERNATIONAL ENCYCLOPEDIA OF COMMUNICATION

EDITED BY | WOLFGANG DONSBACH

STUDENT COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE –
ZINES



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BLACKWELL PUBLISHING

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK

550 Swanston Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia

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First published 2008 by Blackwell Publishing Ltd

1 2008

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

The international encyclopedia of communication/edited by Wolfgang Donsbach.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4051-3199-5 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Communication—Encyclopedias. I. Donsbach, Wolfgang, 1949–

P87.5.158 2008

302.203—dc22

2007047271

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Minion

by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong

Printed in Singapore

by C.O.S. Printers Pte Ltd

The publisher's policy is to use permanent paper from mills that operate a sustainable forestry policy, and which has been manufactured from pulp processed using acid-free and elementary chlorine-free practices. Furthermore, the publisher ensures that the text paper and cover board used have met acceptable environmental accreditation standards.

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Violence as Media Content, Effects on Children of

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Many children today spend more time consuming media than they spend attending school, or in any other activity except for sleeping. By “media” we mean any form of mass communication such as → television, → Internet, video and computer games (→ Video Games), comic books (→ Comics), and → radio. Violence is a dominant theme in most forms of media. For example, content analyses show that about 60 percent of television programs in the USA contain violence, and so do about 70–90 percent of the top-selling video games. By “violence” we mean an extreme act of physical aggression, such as assaulting another person (→ Violence as Media Content).

EFFECT TYPES

For decades researchers have investigated the short- and long-term effects of media violence (→ Media Effects, History of). These researchers have found evidence for at least two important short-term effects and three important long-term ones. The *short-term effects* are “priming effect” (→ Priming Theory), i.e., exposure to media violence immediately stimulates aggressive thoughts and ideas, and “mimicry effect”, i.e., children immediately

mimic whatever they see, including violent behaviors they see in the mass media. The *long-term effects* are the “mean-world effect” (→ Cultivation Effects), i.e., the more violent media children consume, the more they think the world is a mean and hostile place and the more afraid they are likely to become; the → “observational learning effect,” i.e., the more violent media children consume, the more likely they are to think and act like the aggressors they observe, even long afterward; and the → “desensitization effect,” i.e., the more violent media children consume, the more tolerant and accepting they become of violence (→ Media Effects; Media Effects Duration; Violence as Media Content, Effects of).

Short-Term Effects

Experimental studies on *priming effects* have shown that exposing participants of any age to violent media for relatively short amounts of time (e.g., 20 minutes) causes increases in their aggressive thoughts, angry feelings, and aggressive behaviors (for a review see Anderson et al. 2003; → Experimental Design). For example, laboratory experiments have shown that exposure to violent media makes people more willing to shock others or blast others with loud noise (→ Experiment, Laboratory). The exposure to violent media activates these aggressive ideas and thoughts in the mind (primes them), which in turn makes aggressive behavior more likely.

Experiments on *mimicry effects* have shown that even very young children will immediately mimic violent or nonviolent behaviors they see being done in the mass media. Bandura et al. (1963) first showed this for nursery school kids hitting “Bobo” dolls, but others have shown the same effect with nursery school kids hitting other kids (Bjorkqvist 1985; → Bandura, Albert). The propensity to mimic facial expressions and simple observed behaviors seems to be a “hard-wired” process that emerges in infancy. It is differentiated from “imitation,” which is a longer-term process requiring encoding of a script, its retention in memory, and its use at a later time.

Heavy TV viewers (defined as viewing for 4 hours per day or more) are more fearful about becoming victims of violence, are more distrustful of others, and are more likely to perceive the world as a dangerous, mean, and hostile place. The description of this as *mean-world syndrome* is derived from → cultivation theory (Gerbner 1969; → Gerbner, George), which claims that repeated exposure to television has small but cumulative effects on people’s beliefs about what the real world is like. This process seems to begin early in childhood, with even 7–11 year olds displaying this pattern (Peterson & Zill 1981). In general, the mean-world syndrome only seems to apply to appraisals of environments with which people have relatively little experience. Although violent media makes people more afraid of crime in their city, exposure to violent media has relatively little impact on people’s feelings of safety in their own neighborhood.

Long-Term Effects

Although Bandura first included both short-term and long-term copying of observed behaviors under the rubric of “imitation” or “observational learning,” more recent theoretical approaches to imitation have distinguished immediate copying of observed behaviors (called mimicry) from delayed copying (called *imitation or observational learning*). Often

what is acquired in observational learning is not a simple behavior but behavioral → scripts, beliefs, → attitudes, and other → cognitions that make a class of behaviors (e.g., aggressive behaviors) more likely. A number of longitudinal studies have now shown that exposure to media violence in childhood has a significant impact on children's real-world aggression and violence when they grow up (Anderson et al. 2003; → Longitudinal Analysis).

For example, in one study children exposed to violent media were significantly more aggressive 15 years later (Huesmann et al. 2003). Importantly, this study also found that aggression as a child was unrelated to exposure to violent media as a young adult, effectively ruling out the possibility that this relationship is merely a result of more aggressive children consuming more violent media. The effects of violent video games on children's attitudes toward violence are of particular concern. Feeling empathy requires taking the perspective of the victim, whereas violent video games encourage players to take the perspective of the perpetrator. Exposure to violent TV programs and films increases people's pro-violence attitudes, but exposure to violent video games has the additional consequence of teaching decreased empathy for victims (Funk et al. 2004; → Computer Games and Child Development).

In part, this impact occurs because exposure to violent media desensitizes people emotionally to violence and makes them more tolerant of their own aggression (see below). However, a more important process is likely that violent media teaches children that violent behavior is an appropriate means of solving problems, the violent scripts they can use to solve social problems, and that good consequences can come from behaving violently. As adults children do not recall exactly the violent behaviors they saw in the media as children but they do imitate those behaviors, because they learned lasting beliefs that make those behaviors likely.

People who consume a lot of violent media become less sympathetic to victims of violence. For example, research has shown that after exposure to violent media people show more sympathy for perpetrators of violence and less empathy toward their victims. The reduced empathy for victims of violence can cause people to become less willing to help violence victims in the real world and more likely to accept violent behavior in themselves and others. In one such study, children who saw a violent movie were then less willing to intervene when they saw two younger children fighting (Drabman & Thomas 1974). One reason why people may become more tolerant of violence and less empathic toward victims is that they become emotionally desensitized to it over time (*desensitization effect*). Research has shown that after consuming violent media, people are less physiologically aroused by real depictions of violence (e.g., Carnagey et al. in press; → Habituation).

MODERATORS AND SIZE OF VIOLENT MEDIA EFFECTS

Although it is clear that violent media make people more aggressive, more tolerant of violence, and more fearful of crime, not all forms of violence are alike. Media that glamorize violence and feature attractive role models (e.g., "good guys") may have a particularly strong influence, especially when the model's behaviors are reinforced. Whether someone is more likely to become an aggressor or a victim may also depend on whom they identify with, the perpetrators of violence, or their victims. However, for practical purposes, the sheer amount and variety of violence children are exposed to makes it likely that all children

are vulnerable to these effects in varying degrees. Both boys and girls are affected. Both more and less intelligent children are affected. Both aggressive and nonaggressive children are affected. The long-term effects are greater for children than for adults (Bushman & Huesmann 2006).

The effect of violent media on aggression is not trivial, either, ranging from a significance of 0.2 to 0.3 on the average. For example, exposure to violent media is a larger risk factor for youth violence than other well-known risk factors such as low IQ, being from a broken home, having abusive parents, and having antisocial peers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001, Table 4-1).

Smoking cigarettes provides a good analogy for violent media effects (Bushman & Anderson 2001). Not everyone who smokes gets lung cancer, and not everyone who has lung cancer smokes, but smoking is an important risk factor for lung cancer. Similarly, not everyone who consumes violent media becomes aggressive, and not every aggressive person consumes violent media, but violent media is an important risk factor for aggression. Smoking one cigarette probably will not give a person lung cancer, but repeated smoking over time greatly increases the risk. Watching one violent program or playing one violent video game probably will not make a person more aggressive, but repeated exposure over time greatly increases the risk.

SEE ALSO: ▶ Attitudes ▶ Bandura, Albert ▶ Cognition ▶ Comics ▶ Computer Games and Child Development ▶ Cultivation Effects ▶ Cultivation Theory ▶ Desensitization ▶ Experiment, Laboratory ▶ Experimental Design ▶ Gerbner, George ▶ Habituation ▶ Internet ▶ Longitudinal Analysis ▶ Media Effects ▶ Media Effects Duration ▶ Media Effects, History of ▶ Observational Learning ▶ Priming Theory ▶ Radio ▶ Scripts ▶ Television ▶ Video Games ▶ Violence as Media Content ▶ Violence as Media Content, Effects of

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Violence and the Media, History of

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For over a century violence in the media has been framed as a “problem” by social commentators. The arrival of a new medium (from the early tabloids to comic books, from → cinema to the → Internet) has typically been accompanied by a wave of concern about its potential for “exposing” an audience to representations considered undesirable by policymakers and moral guardians (→ Tabloid Press; Comics; Morality and Taste in Media Content). It is no accident that it is the mass availability of these texts that has typically been of concern: the “mass” audience being conceived as endangered and dangerous, vulnerable and victimizing (→ Violence as Media Content, Effects of). These concerns have also shaped academic debate. As a result, work on violence in the media has been concentrated in social science disciplines, particularly in the US, and the work of arts and humanities scholars has been marginalized in public debate and policymaking.

DEFINING VIOLENCE

One of the difficulties of summarizing this work is that there is no clear consensus as to what violence is. Much work in the field has defined violence as a physical action (a punch, a slap, a shooting). One of the benefits of such a definition is that it makes it relatively easy to determine how much violence there is in a text or group of texts. Content analysis has been a key method for analyzing violence in the media (→ Content Analysis, Quantitative; Content Analysis, Qualitative), particularly on television (although “television” has itself become more difficult to define, and hence sample, as channels and modes of delivery have multiplied). Such studies have measured violence and tracked changes in the amount and nature of violence on television over fixed periods. The most influential of these studies in the US is the Cultural Indicators Project begun by → George Gerbner and his colleagues in the 1960s (Gerbner et al. 1994).