

Bad effects of media

Sociology, Violence



exercise, a moral panic substituting for practicality... It appeals to an American propensity that sociologist Philip Slater called the Toilet Assumption: once the appearance of a social problem is swept out of sight, so is the problem. And the crusade costs nothing." " To be loathsome, popular culture doesn't have to be murderous." (Source: Todd Gitlin, Imagebusters: The Hollow Crusade Against TV Violence, 1994) Rather than focusing on violent content, Gitlin argues we should be condemning " trash on the grounds that it is stupid, wasteful, morally bankrupt: that it coarsens taste, that it shrivels the capacity to feel and know the whole of human experience." Media Violence and the Inequitable Society Gerbner warns that the search for a link between media violence and real life aggression is in itself a symptom of the problem itself. For Gerbner, media violence demonstrates power: " It shows one's place in the 'pecking order' that runs society." For example, Gerbner's decades-long study of television violence indicates that villains are typically portrayed as poor, young, male members of visible minorities, and victims are overwhelmingly female. He argues that by making the world look like a dangerous place, especially for white people, the majority will be more willing to give the authorities greater power to enforce the status quo. This is an argument that Michael Moore used in the award-winning movie, Bowling for Columbine. Journalist Thierry Jobin writes, "[Moore] denounces the way in which the government and the media foster a feeling of insecurity, pushing Americans to barricade themselves in their homes, a loaded 44 Magnum under their pillows." Gerbner worries that this sense of insecurity and powerlessness will be used to justify a weakening of democratic values. Media Violence as Consumer Choice Opponents of

regulation argue that it's up to the viewer to decide what to watch. If you don't like television violence, they say, then turn off the TV. However, research indicates that the popularity of a TV show depends less on content and more on scheduling. As Gerbner points out, "... violence as such is not highly rated. That means it coasts on viewer inertia, not selection. Unlike other media use, viewing is a ritual; people watch by the clock and not by the program." Joanne Cantor criticizes the media industry for saying it's up to parents, not the industry, to decide what their children watch: " They make harmful products, which come into our homes automatically through television, they market them to children too young to use them safely, and they try to keep parents in the dark about their effects." Cantor argues parents need tools to help them decide what is healthy and unhealthy for their kids. One such tool is the V-chip, which enables parents to program their televisions with pre-set industry ratings to screen out certain shows. Keith Spicer, former chair of the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, calls the V-chip a " sexy, telegenic little gizmo that fulfills the fantasy of a magic wand." The industry has been quick to endorse V-chip technology but critics argue that its real function is to protect the industry from parents, not the other way around. Gerbner states, " It's like major polluters saying, 'We shall continue business as usual, but don't worry, we'll also sell you gas masks to 'protect your children' and have a 'free choice!' ... Programming needs to be diversified, not just 'rated.' A better government regulation is antitrust, which could create a level playing field, admitting new entries and a greater diversity of ownership, employment, and representation. That would reduce violence to its

legitimate role and frequency." Todd Gitlin agrees with Gerbner that the real issue is broadcaster irresponsibility—though he does endorse the V-chip because, " parents deserve all the technology they can get." Media Violence and Active Audiences Researchers like David Buckingham in the U. K. and Henry Jenkins in the U. S. add another dimension to the debate. They argue that rather than focusing on what media do to people, we should focus on what people do with media. As Jenkins writes, media images " are not simple chemical agents like carcinogens that produce predictable results upon those who consume them. They are complex bundles of often contradictory meanings that can yield an enormous range of different responses from the people who consume them." From this perspective, people don't just passively absorb messages transmitted through the media; they choose which media to consume and are actively involved in determining what the meaning of the messages will be. And that process doesn't occur in a social vacuum. Personal experiences affect what we watch and how we make sense of it. Our class position, our religious upbringing, our level of education, our family setting, and our peer groups all have a role to play in how we understand violent content. Jenkins draws a different lesson from the shooting in Littleton: " Media images may have given [the Columbine shooters] symbols to express their rage and frustration, but the media did not create the rage or generate their alienation. What sparked the violence was not something they saw on the internet or on television, not some song lyric or some sequence from a movie, but things that really happened to them... If we want to do something about the problem, we are better off focusing our attention on negative social experiences and not the symbols

we use to talk about those experiences." The pervasiveness of television
Researchers have long focused on television violence because television is
the most pervasive format for media violence. Television has provided
American children access to endless hours of increasingly violent
programming that simply did not exist before the 1950s. Many
schoolchildren spend more time watching television than they do doing
homework or playing with friends. Because of this, it has been estimated
that the average American will witness approximately 20,000 simulated
television deaths in his or her lifetime. The sheer pervasiveness of television
leads Mary Ann Watson, the author of *Defining Visions: Television and the
American Experience Since 1945*, to conclude that saying "if you don't like
what's on TV, just turn it off" is like saying "if you're troubled by air
pollution, just stop breathing." In 1996, the argument that television
violence is too pervasive led Congress to pass the Telecommunications Act,
which required television broadcasters to develop a voluntary ratings system
for TV programs. The act also required television manufacturers to include
the V-chip, an electronic device that allows parents to block out any program
with a particular rating, in all new television sets made after 2000.