

Media Violence and Children: A Situational Analysis

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Mass media is a powerful institutional localization. It transmits persuasive messages on the nature of reality. Media teach us about prevailing values, beliefs, myths, stereotypes and trends and also provide an avenue through which we learn new attitudes and behavior. Sociologists, psychologists and researchers continue to debate the degree to which violence in the media influence behavior of the people. The influence of mass media is realized on every member of the modern society but the impact of media is far greater on children than on adults. Watching violence is a popular form of entertainment among children. However, not all violence portrayals in the media influence children's behavior to the same degree and also that not all children are equally influenced by portrayals of violence in the media. Nevertheless, the portrayals of violence in media pull the string of development which is more seriously experienced by children, leading to imitation and legitimization of violence and desensitization towards violence. It is in this backdrop that the paper attempts to highlight the impact of media violence in shaping the behavior and value systems of children.

[Key words: Violence, Socialization, Mass Media, desensitization, Legitimization.]

The term media comes from Latin meaning "middle" suggesting that the media's function is to connect people. Mass media refers to medium which can communicate a message to a large group often simultaneously. It is a source that delivers

information, entertains and stimulates. It broadly comprises of two categories, namely print and electronic. The notion of mass media was generally restricted to print media until the post second world war, when radio, television and video were introduced. The electronic media because of its audio-visual facilities became very popular as it provided both information and entertainment. The colour and sound engaged the viewers / listeners and it was easier for the general public to passively watch television or listen to the radio than to actively read. In contemporary societies mass media significantly influences the life of the people. There are three theories to describe the influence of mass media. *The Limited Effect Theory* which states that since people usually choose the type of media based on their existing belief, media exerts a negligible influence. *The Class Dominant Theory*, states that media reflects the views of those who control it. Such a group is often minority elite. *The Culturalist Theory* claims that people interact with media and thereby create their own meanings out of the images and messages which they receive from it. According to this theory the audience plays an active (creating their own meaning) rather than passive role in relation to mass media. Although there are various forms of mass media but television and internet are the most commonly used forms of mass media in the contemporary society. Television is a powerful force, reflecting and commenting on various social issues and human conditions in compelling, comic, biased and sometimes tragic ways. Internet helps in the exchange of ideas, dissemination of information, ideologies, world views and opinions in a constant steady stream. Given its omnipresence and easy accessibility, internet proves to be a powerful audio-visual medium. It makes comparatively easy, at any time of the day or night for anyone to influence others or in turn to be influenced by others on the World Wide Web. Confronted with a steady, infinite and powerful set of sounds and images and with all the exchanged and shared information and opinions reaching to a wide audience in a split of a second, the influence of mass media is realized on every member of the modern society. Regardless of age individuals respond to media content, learning from what they see and hear. However, the impact of media is far greater on children than on adults (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mass_media)

Childhood and adolescence are formative stages of development during which the child is shaped both personally and socially, and acquires the standards of society, which will influence his/her thoughts, feelings and actions. It is the prime period for the formal inculcation of social values which are the determinants of virtually all social behaviours and which has far-reaching effects on all human endeavours. Dominant values influence beliefs and attitudes, and are reflected in behavior and/or lifestyle. Childhood is a period of information-seeking where the focus lies on defining the world, and when multiple transitions occur. With these rapid changes there arises an increased potential for both positive and negative outcomes. That which occurs during this stage of development often remains fixed later on in life. Living in a media saturated world, the media has become an integral part of everyday life and children are spending between 35 to 55 hours per week on the different forms of media. Considering the amount of time children spend in the presence of the media and their capacity to give themselves over completely to the world created by the media, the influence that media exerts on their development cannot be ignored. Media exposes them to a world far beyond their immediate experience and presents attitudes and values different from those of their families. Research has shown that excessive time spent in unorganized, unsupervised activities tends to introduce opportunities in which children bond with antisocial values, consequently leading to delinquency. In such a circumstance the power of media as an agent of socialization on the planet today stands undisputed. Socialization which in broad terms involves the learning of laws, norms, values, customs, belief structures, attitudes and world view of the broader society to a large extent shapes the behaviour of children. There are a number of agents of socialization for example, the family, schools, religious groups, corporations and most importantly the mass media. Traditionally, the family has been the child's primary socialiser, with its role extended by the school, religious institution and the larger community. These institutions, which were designed to help children in the transition from childhood to adulthood are now experiencing severe stress and are becoming sources of risk. During the process of socialization the mass media forms one of the most important connections between social and individual

culture. With the ever increasing use of the mass media, it has acquired the role of a 'third parent'. The media is increasingly fulfilling the functions previously performed by the family, school and religion. (<http://www.uir.unisa.ac.za/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10500...d>)

Watching violence is a popular form of entertainment. Wrestling is a popular spectator sport in many countries of the world. People also enjoy combat between animals such as bull fights, cock fights and dog fights. Violence is frequently depicted in folklore, fairy tales and other literature. Local news shows provide extensive coverage of violent crimes in order to increase their ratings. Technological advances have dramatically increased the availability of violent entertainment. The introduction of television was critical, particularly making violent entertainment more available to children. More recently, cable systems, video cassette recorders and video/internet games have increased exposure. Hand held cameras and video monitors now permit filming of actual crimes in progress, competition to attract viewers, particularly young viewers has led to an increase in the media depiction of violence (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2083426>).

Today, most homes have at least one television, often more and most of the programmes contain violence in staggering numbers. Children are exposed to television more than to any other mass medium. Schramm and his associates reported that on an average, five years old children watched television two hours every day. Television viewing time reached three hours by the time these children were eight years old. In finding that often was subsequently cited, Schramm said that from the age of three to sixteen, children spent more time in front of the television set than they spent in school (Biagi, 2010). Not all violence portrayals in the media influence children behavior to the same degree. A viewer is more likely to learn violent behavior if the perpetrator is attractive, there is moral justification for the aggression, the repeated violence is either rewarded or not punished, the repeated violence appears realistic and includes a weapon, the victim experiences no consequences or the violence occurs within a context of humour. Another consideration is age. Younger children, especially under 7 years of age are more vulnerable because they cannot distinguish fantasy from reality and may imitate what they see. They may also experience nightmares, anxiety and feelings of a lack of safety.

Showing the use of firearms as a way to resolve conflict, along with the availability of guns in the home can also create a deadly formula for children (<http://www.readperiodicals.com/201105/2469563561.html>)

Media violence is more likely to have a strong effect on children who are exposed to violence in their lives. Personal fantasizing about the characters or Daydream will increase the influence of the violent scenes a child has watched. Children with emotional, behavioural, learning or impulse control problems may be more influenced by violence than other children. Finally, the effects of viewing television violence may be either more immediate or long term. Some children may exhibit violent behavior shortly after watching violence, while for others the violent behavior may not surface until years later (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010). Television has popularized the 'culture of heroes', which promotes justice through the physical elimination of enemies. Many researchers have concluded that young people who watch violence tend to behave more aggressively or violently, particularly when provoked. This is mainly characteristic of 8 to 12 years old boys, who are more vulnerable to such influences. Media brings an individual to violence in three ways. First, violent acts excite spectators, and the aggressive energy can then be transferred to everyday life, pushing an individual to engage in physical activities on the streets. This type of influence is temporary, lasting from several hours to several days. Second, television can portray ordinary daily violence committed by parents or peers. As a result children are continually exposed to the use of violence in different situations and the number of violent acts on television appears to be increasing. Third, violence depicted in the media is unreal for example wounds bleed less, and the real pain and agony resulting from violent actions are very rarely shown, so the consequences of violent behavior often seem negligible. Overtime, television causes a shift in the system of human values and indirectly leads children to view violence as a desirable and even courageous way of reestablishing justice (www.un.org/esa/socdev/unyin/documents/ch07.pdf).

To the numerous factors contributing towards child delinquency, the media often adds another ingredient of the glamour of a totally unattainable lifestyle. They often present degrading sex and violence that are not wholesome even for

fortunate children from a stable family background, who can guide T.V. viewing or interpret negative events when these are presented. Disadvantaged children are further disadvantaged with no one to limit their viewing or to give a proper interpretation of the stimuli which they regularly watch. The electronic media contribute to a general climate that tolerates violence, instant gratification, and self-indulgence without concern for consequences. The extent of the destructive influence on the most vulnerable members of the audience is very great. The impulsive, undisciplined and undirected child sees violence used as a solution to problems not only by the villains but also by the heroes. Explosions, firefights with automatic weapons, knives assaults and so on are often presented in an atmosphere of stimulation and excitement (Hahn, 1998). The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has expressed concern about the problems of children and television violence. It is reported that television may be a powerful, influential factor in developing persons' value systems and in shaping behavior. Television therefore may have a positive influence when the programmes are educational and present appropriate ethical and pro-social values. The opposite is true, however, when television shows do not present positive values and behavior; and unfortunately much of television programming today is violent (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010). Many studies have been conducted on the effect of television violence. Dr. Eron conducted a study on media violence. He followed a group of young people for 22 years and found that those who watched more television at the age of eight were more likely at age 30, to have committed more serious crimes, to be more aggressive when drinking, and to punish their children more harshly than others. Other researchers repeated Dr Eron's study and found similar results. Another researcher, Brandon Centerwall, surveyed young male felons imprisoned for committing violent crimes, between one quarter and one third of the respondents reported imitating the crime techniques which they saw on television (<http://www.crisa.org.za/downloads/webviol.pdf>).

Researchers have found that children and youth who watch many hours of television violence may:

Be sensitized or become 'numb' to the horrors and effects of violence.

Gradually begin to accept violence as a way to solve problems. Begin to imitate and act out the violence that they observe on television.

Begin to identify with certain violent characters or victims of violence. (Lawrence & Hesse, 2010)

The common argument is that children imitate the violence they see on television. There appears to be documented cases in which events on television are followed by similar events in the real world. Many parents have observed their children imitating behaviours they have observed on television. Some of the cases reported in India are:

KOLKATA: Nine-year old Rashmi Roy wanted to twirl in the air like her favourite screen hero Shaktiman. She strung a towel, tied it around herself and jumped. She choked to death, alone in the house, with no one to help her. Both parents are daily wage earners and work seven days a week to fend for their children's upbringing. They were away when the incident happened. It was no suicide, police say. "Reshmi was trying to imitate Shaktiman and got herself entangled in the gamchha. She was taken to hospital where she was pronounced dead on arrival," said South 24- Parganas SP, Humayun Kabir. The incident happened in Behala. Reshmi and her siblings, brother Satyajit (7) and sister Sunita (12) loved to watch Shaktiman on Sundays. They would often try to imitate the superhero's stunts (http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2004-06-21/kolkata/27165208_1_shaktiman-sona-pramila)

CHENNAI: A teacher was stabbed to death in the classroom of a private school here on Thursday, allegedly by a 15-year-old student who was upset at being repeatedly reprimanded by her for not doing well in studies. R. Uma Maheswari (39), who had been teaching science and Hindi for close to a decade at the St. Mary's Anglo-Indian Higher Secondary School on Armenian Street in Parry's Corner, was sitting in the first floor room, for the IX A Hindi class, when the boy rushed in, slashed her throat and stabbed her in the abdomen and chest. She was taken to a nearby private hospital, which referred her to the Government General Hospital. But she died on the way. During questioning by police, the boy said he had recently seen the Hindi movie *Agneepath* and was influenced by the hero who takes revenge on those who falsely implicate his father. The boy had failed in both mathematics and

Hindi. While the mathematics teacher had not scolded him, Ms. Maheswari had written remarks in his diary. This angered him. (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/student-stabs-teacher-to-death-in-chennai-school/article2874995.ece>)

The process of imitation is emphasized by social learning theory, a well-established approach in social psychology. Albert Bandura believed television was a source of behavior modeling. Since aggression is a prominent feature of many shows, children who have a high degree of exposure to the media may exhibit a relatively high incidence of hostility themselves in imitation of the aggression they have witnessed. Albert Bandura is known for the Bobo Doll experiment. In this experiment he had children witness a model aggressively attacking a plastic clown called the Bobo Doll. After watching the model the children were placed in a room with attractive toys. Bandura and many other researchers found that 88% of the children imitated the aggressive behavior. Eight months later 40% of the same children reproduced the violent behavior observed in the experiment. In the process of behavior modeling learning occurs through four stages. *Attention* is the first stage of learning. Individuals cannot learn much by observation unless they perceive and attend to the significant features of the modeled behavior. For example, in the Bobo Doll experiment the children witnessed the Bobo Doll being verbally and physically abused by the model. The next stage is *retention*. In order to reproduce the modeled behavior the individual must code the information into long term memory which will make the information retrievable. In the experiment children hit the doll aggressively because it was coded in their memory. *Motor reproduction* involves that the observer must possess the physical capabilities that would enable to reproduce the models behavior. The last stage is of *motivations or reinforcements*. The observer expects to receive positive reinforcements for the modeled behavior (www.criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/bandura.htm). A different interpretation for the effect mechanism is offered by Arousal Theory. According to this approach, viewing violence on television generally arouses children and stimulates them to behave violently, though not necessarily through the imitation of the same specific behaviours. Arousal Theory may compliment the social learning theory, as arousal may

prepare the ground for learning more specific behaviours (Lemish, 2007).

But televisions are not the only medium that delivers violent content. Today, a large number of children play video games. Experimental studies have shown that playing a violent video game causes a marked increase in aggressive thinking. Studies have also shown that these games cause an increase in retaliatory aggression and a decrease in pro-social behaviours. Forty seven percent of the most popular games have a violent theme. The interactive nature of these games contributes to increasingly aggressive behaviours in children and that these behaviours continue into adulthood (<http://www.readperiodicals.com/201105/2469563561.html>). Disadvantaged, unsupervised children often become immersed in video games that are so violent that a reward is given for tearing off the head or tearing out the heart of an opponent. The vivid acts of violence, in which the game player vicariously participates, might be dismissed by some as fantasy or simple entertainment, but for the very vulnerable they can be overstimulation and seduction (Hahn, 1998). Since aggressors in the game are usually males and females are usually victims, boys will be more likely to respond with aggression and girls with fear. Studies indicate that after playing violent internet/video games boys tend to feel satisfied but on the other hand girls feel less comfortable and are less likely to play a game. Furthermore, it leads to creation of dominant masculinity in relation to women. In the game there is a determination to mark out differences between male and female characters where females are sexualized and eroticized. It can thus be derived that players are introduced to the pleasures of sexual domination. Given that the consumers and players of games are male, it usually means domination by men of women (<http://www.crisa.org.za/downloads/webviol.pdf>). Prof. Anderson noted that internet/video games contribute to aggressive and violent behavior in children because of the following reasons:

Identification with the aggressor increases imitation of the aggressor

Active participation increases learning

Rehearsing an entire behavioural sequence is more effective than rehearsing a partial one.

Repetition increases learning. (<http://www.readperiodicals.com/201105/2469563561.html>)

The distinguishing feature of the video games namely interactivity enables it to send false messages to the players. For example, it conveys to the player that problems can be resolved quickly and with little personal investment, or/and the best way to solve a problem is to eliminate the source of the problem, or/and use instinctual rather than thoughtful behaviours to react to problem. As the computer industry becomes more sophisticated in its productions, the games also promise a more realistic version of events. (<http://www.crisa.org.za/downloads/webviol.pdf>)

The overall effect of mass media on children can be summed up as leading to a process of *desensitization* and *legitimization*. Violent programmes supply children with many ideas for specific acts of violence. They also teach viewers the functionality of violent behaviours. Justification of violent behavior increases the chances of children's imitation and positive reinforcement provides added value by suggesting to children what society values. Furthermore, it is argued that viewing violence may serve to remove inhibitions in performing violent acts through a process of *desensitization* to their implications as well as a process of *legitimization* of such behaviours as being normal and acceptable in society (Lemish, 2007)

Media violence is a major contributing factor and a public health problem that must be addressed by all available resources in the community, the schools and the home. Good parenting, however, is the greatest defense against the effects of media violence. It is parents who can monitor their child's daily use and make their voices heard in the community so that the media industry, public health practitioners, legislators and educators will be proactive in mitigating the media portrayal of violence to protect children from this escalating public health issue. There are various methods available to parents and other interest groups to limit the time children may be exposed to the violent content. Firstly, children have to be taught about exploitation, pornography, hate literature and excessive violence so that they know how to react when they see such materials. Secondly, the computer can be placed in a visible area of the home where it could be easier to monitor the time and content of the internet connection. Thirdly,

children should be taught media literacy skills. In this regard parents can help children distinguish between fantasy and reality, teach children that real life violence has consequences, help children understand how they are being targeted by internet game manufacturers (<http://www.readperiodicals.com/201105/2469563561.html>). Many parents are unaware of the risk of media violence, therefore, organizations have developed guidelines for parents which include that parents should not make television the focal point of the home, keep television off during meals, limit television use to no more than one to two hours per day and do not use television or internet/video games as an electronic babysitter. Lastly, it is suggested that parents as far as possible watch television with their children and discuss any content viewed as not acceptable and point out the difference between fantasy and real life. Parents ultimately bear the responsibility for the environment in which their children are raised. It is they who have to guide their children away from the polluting environment and the greedy purveyors of violence.

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