

person will have a negative effect from the exposure, but they haven't produced much insight into how the risk factors work together. Therefore, research can only suggest a partial solution, and other groups are not willing to act on such a weak foundation.

CONCLUSION

Misinformation characterizes the current context underlying the problem of media violence. This misinformation is crystallized into a set of 11 beliefs—what I refer to as myths. Belief in these myths impoverishes the context by channeling our thinking into unproductive areas. The myths continue to wall us off from alternative perspectives that together would allow us to see the problem of media violence in a broader context. The current narrow context contains no useful solutions to the problem of media violence. We need a broader perspective in order to see ways to gain control over reducing the risk of negative effects and thus ameliorating the problem.

The purpose of this book is to analyze each of the 11 myths and reveal their faulty nature. I am not arguing that exposing the faulty nature of these myths will automatically lead to a solution to the problem. However, I do believe that unless we can move beyond the myths and thus broaden our perspective on the problem, we are locked in a context that guarantees that we will fail to do anything of substance to address this serious and persistent problem.

❖ TWO ❖

MYTH 1

Violence in the media does not affect me, but others are at high risk.

Most people do not believe that media violence has had any negative effect on them. In public opinion polls, typically 88% of people say that the media have not affected them personally (Whitman, 1996).

This belief is faulty. The media continually and profoundly affect everyone, and when the messages are violent, people are at risk for a variety of negative effects. However, people do not perceive these negative effects happening to them in their everyday lives—not because those effects don't exist, but because people do not know what to look for as evidence of the effects.

This myth persists primarily because people have a very narrow view of negative effects. They think in terms of high-profile criminal acts of violence, so if you ask the typical person, "Does violence on television and the movies have any effect?" most people will say yes—recalling a horrible instance where someone copied a violent criminal act that was in a movie or in the news. However, if you were to ask those same people if violence on television and movies has had an effect on them, most would say no. Thus, most people believe that other people are at risk whereas they are free from risk. This difference in perception between one's self and others has been labeled the "third-person effect."

The reason for this third-person effect with media violence is that few people believe they behave aggressively after watching violence, but they have ample evidence from news reports that others are influenced to behave aggressively. There are frequent examples of copycat crimes and of kids going on shooting sprees at school in imitation of movie and video game violence. Also, many adults notice their children imitating violent television characters they see on action adventure shows or on the *World Wrestling Federation*. We all remember children (or even ourselves as children) racing around the house chasing siblings and pets while imitating many of the movements and even the sounds from violent portrayals. But we know we do not behave that way now, so we believe there is no effect on us. However, there are effects—we just need to take a broader view to see what they are.

TAKING A BROADER VIEW ON EFFECTS

What are the effects of exposure to media violence? This is an extremely important question. The media research that has examined the influence of media violence on individuals and society contains indications of several dozen such effects (see Table 2.1). Of course, not all of these effects have the same degree of research support. One of these effects—disinhibition—has a great deal of research to support its existence, and several other effects—fear and desensitization—have substantial empirical support also. It is bad enough that people typically overlook the presence of these three effects in their everyday lives, but there are many more than three negative effects. The other effects have attracted the attention of some researchers, but none of these other effects has generated more than a few studies. This is not to say that these other effects are not important. Many of these other effects may be found to be more powerful and more widespread than the three that are well documented. To be sure, we will have to wait for researchers to provide a series of careful tests on each. But in the meantime, it is worth considering a broader spectrum of risk.

Before I describe each of these effects across a broader spectrum, it is first important to illuminate two characteristics underlying this set of effects. These two issues are timing of effect and type of effect.

Timing of Effects

When the public looks for evidence of effects from exposure to media violence, they notice examples that happen immediately after the exposure. If

Table 2.1 Broad Perspective on Effects of Media Violence

Type	Immediate	Long-Term
Behavioral	Imitation and copying Triggering Disinhibition Attraction	Generalizing novel behaviors Long-term triggering Malformed superego Training behavior
Physiological	Fight-flight reaction Excitation transfer	Physiological habituation Narcotizing
Emotional	Temporary fear Desensitization Catharsis	Emotional habituation
Attitudinal	Opinion creation or change	Reinforcement Cultivation of fear
Cognitive	Learning facts Learning behaviors	Generalizing factual patterns Acquiring social norms Programming thinking
Societal		Moving mean Changing institutions

two boys are watching a violent car chase on television and then begin chasing each other around the house while tackling and hitting each other, most people will conclude that the television viewing triggered the subsequent mayhem. Such examples make it easy to see a link between the viewing and the effect. Immediate effects—like this example—are those that happen during exposure or within a very short period of time afterward. These effects can either dissipate within minutes—such as an increase in heart rate and blood pressure—or can last for a long time—such as a vivid memory of a horrible act. The key characteristic about immediate effects is that they are fairly observable by researchers. For this reason, it is relatively easy to attribute the effect to the stimulus preceding it.

However, when looking for outcomes of exposure to media violence, we should not limit ourselves to immediate effects. There are also some negative effects that take a much longer time to show up. If we ignore these, we will greatly underestimate the influence media violence has on us.

Long-term effects do not occur after a single exposure to media violence; they manifest themselves only after an accumulation of exposures, so if you do observe one of the long-term effects immediately after a particular exposure, it is shortsighted to blame that one exposure. Rather, that exposure should be regarded as "the straw that broke the camel's back." When trying to understand a long-term effect, it is important to understand that the cause of an effect is an accumulation of exposures as well as other factors and not only the most recent exposure. In addition, it is important to understand that even if a particular exposure is not followed immediately by an example of a negative effect, the exposure could still have had a partial influence, because it contributes to the accumulation of exposure. This is a major reason why we have more research evidence on immediate effects than on long-term effects. With a long-term effect, the researcher has to document the contributions in the accumulation and then be around when the effect eventually manifests itself. This is prohibitively time consuming to do with individuals, but some researchers have been successful at approaching the research challenge from a more macro perspective, in which they look for patterns in the aggregate. Two examples will illustrate this. In 1973, Tannis MacBeth Williams studied the children in a Canadian town before and after the town got television service. She found that the behavior of the children in general did not dramatically change immediately, but that two years after the introduction of television, the rates of hitting, shoving, and biting among first and second graders had increased by 160% (Williams, 1986).

Also, Brian Centerwall (1993b) conducted a macro study in which he examined murder rates in the United States, Canada, and South Africa after the introduction of television. In each country, 10 to 15 years after television began providing programming, murder rates doubled. Centerwall explained the lag by reasoning that it took that long for the first young children exposed to television to come of age. Even looking at other factors—the baby boom, urbanization, the rise of firearms—he claims that none of those factors was as viable an explanation as TV (Leland, 1995).

The general public has been slow to understand and accept lagged effects of media influence. However, these same people have no trouble accepting the belief that eating high-calorie, high-fat foods for years can lead to clogging of a person's arteries, that inhaling cigarette tar or asbestos over the years can lead to lung cancer, or that daily practice on the tennis court can lead to a high degree of tennis skills.

Type of Effect

Effects can show up as a change in our behavior, but they can also manifest themselves in nonbehavioral ways. They can influence automatic bodily functions, emotions, attitudes, and knowledge.

Behavioral effects are those where people are activated to perform some action. Most of the experimental effects research has been focused on behavioral outcomes. Researchers expose participants to violent portrayals and then watch what the participants do in response.

Physiological effects are those that influence a person's automatic bodily processes, which are usually beyond our conscious control. For example, watching violence can increase our heart rate and blood pressure. A horror film triggers rapid breathing and sweaty palms.

The media can make us feel things. They can trigger strong emotions such as fear, rage, and lust. They can also evoke weaker emotions such as sadness, peevishness, and wariness.

The media can create, alter, and reinforce attitudes. When we are exposed to many violent occurrences in the media, we might form the opinion that the world is a mean and dangerous place. Also, over the long term, the media can reinforce and give greater weight to an existing opinion, making it more and more resistant to change.

Cognitive effects are intellectual ones in which the mind acquires new information. We can learn how to commit a complicated crime by watching it portrayed on television. Or the cognitive effect could be more subtle, such as producing a generalization, such as when we "learn" that crime is a serious problem after we see criminal acts portrayed each and every night on the local news.

The five types of effects I have explained here are keyed to the individual person. But there are also broader effects that change society and our institutions. When society is changed, we eventually are influenced to change. This is an indirect effect of the media violence. Thus it is possible for us to avoid all exposure to media violence but still be influenced by it indirectly through the way society changes.

The effects that I present in this chapter should not be regarded as the definitive list of all the effects that could result from exposure to media violence. These 26 effects are those about which we have some evidence. As we continue to conduct more effects research, we may find that we need to add more to this list.

THE IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

The following list contains 12 immediate effects and descriptions of each.

1. Imitation and Copying Behavior

This is the effect that the public focuses on most when thinking about protecting people from the influence of media violence. This is understandable, because copying behavior is very easy to spot, and it is very easy to see the link back to the media content.

The imitation effect is much more prevalent in children than adults (Bandura, 1978, 1979, 1982, 1985; Centerwall, 1993a, 1993b; Comstock, Chaffee, Katzman, McCombs, & Roberts, 1978; Liebert & Schwartzberg, 1977; Tan, 1981; Walters & Willows, 1968). For example, Centerwall (1993b) says that children as young as 14 months "demonstrably observe and incorporate behavior seen on television" (p. 56). Children are aware of their copying violent acts. In a survey of young children, 60% said they frequently copied behaviors they had seen on television (Liebert, Neale, & Davidson, 1973).

2. Triggering Novel Behavior

Triggering is not the same thing as imitation, where someone mimics behavior witnessed in the media. Triggering refers to the media's stimulating a person to act in a violent manner that is not copied from a specific media portrayal. The person acts violently in a novel way to fit the situation at hand. An example of this is "wilding," the term for when teenagers commit violent crimes for fun or out of curiosity (Baker & Gore, 1989). Teens get pumped up by watching violent movies and television programs, listening to violent CDs, and playing violent video games. They want to act out their aggression, so they behave violently in new ways. This happens at rock concerts where bands sing about how bad the government and police are and urge listeners to strike back. The crowds get pumped up, but they strike out at each other and their physical surroundings rather than the government. For example, on the last night of Woodstock 99 some concert goers pushed over a lighting and sound tower. In 1998 alone, 5,711 people were injured while attending rock concerts. One security company executive said, "Bands are more prone to incite the audiences than they used to be." Thus attendees get swept away with hard-driving appeals to violence and later question what they did (Kleiner, 1999).

3. Disinhibition

Exposure to media violence can reduce viewers' normal inhibitions that prevent them from behaving in a violent manner. Although the disinhibition effect can occur immediately after viewing, it can also last over time, especially when viewers are continually exposed to violent messages (Baker & Ball, 1969; Chaffee, 1972; Comstock et al., 1978; Goranson, 1969; Hapkiewicz, 1979; Liebert, 1972; Liebert et al., 1973; Liebert & Poulos, 1975; Liebert & Schwartzberg, 1977; Maccoby, 1964; Roberts & Schramm, 1971; Shirley, 1973; Stein & Friedrich, 1975; Tan, 1981; Tannenbaum & Zillmann, 1975). This is the most researched and well-documented effect of exposure to media violence.

David Grossman, a former Army Ranger, a psychologist, and the author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (1996), points out that the military takes in recruits who have "a powerful, God-given resistance to killing your own kind." To turn recruits into soldiers, the military must reduce the recruits' inhibitions and they do this with psychological conditioning. The military has been very successful with this conditioning. Army officials had discovered that only 15 to 20% of U.S. soldiers in World War II actually fired their weapons in combat, but by the time of the war in Vietnam, the "fire rate" had been increased to 95%. The Army psychologists were able to do this by reprogramming the values of the soldiers.

4. Attraction

Many people are attracted to violence, maybe not all the time, but there come times when people want to see a violent show. If it were not for this effect, violent CDs would not sell, and horror movies would have no audiences. When you add up all the time and money spent by millions of people each year in seeking out this kind of content, this must be regarded as a major effect. (See Myth 6 for more on this effect.)

5. Fight-Flight

Exposure to violence can temporarily arouse people physiologically. During exposure, a person's heart rate and blood pressure increase. These physiological changes are the body's way of getting ready to respond to the violence as if it were a real threat to the viewer. This type of arousal usually

dissipates within an hour after exposure (Doob & Climie, 1972; Tannenbaum & Zillmann, 1975).

6. Excitation Transfer

Violence presented in the media tends to arouse viewers and hence is an energizer. People do not necessarily need to use that energy in an aggressive manner—they can transfer that energy to other outlets. For example, people who are exposed to a strongly violent portrayal can become highly aroused (heightened heart rate) and are ready for action. If there are sexual reminders in their environment, they will be likely to stay highly aroused but shift into a sexual mode. The arousal needs direction, because arousal by itself is not guided. If the viewer guides the energy into positive directions, then the exposure to violence can have a prosocial value. Whatever the direction, the energy from the arousal is short lived and usually dissipates within several minutes after exposure (Zillmann, 1971, 1982, 1991).

7. Temporary Fear

Violence in films and on television can produce intense fright reactions (Blumer, 1933; Cantor, 1994; Cantor & Hoffner, 1990; Cantor & Reilly, 1982; Cantor & Sparks, 1984; Cantor, Wilson, & Hoffner, 1986; Cantril, 1940; Dysinger & Ruckmick, 1933; Himmelweit, Oppenheim, & Vince, 1958; Osborn & Endsley, 1971; Sapolsky & Zillmann, 1978; Schramm, Lyle, & Parker, 1961; Sparks, 1986; Sparks & Cantor, 1986; von Feilitzen, 1975; Wertham, 1954; Wilson & Cantor, 1985). Fright as an immediate emotional response typically lasts only a short time, but it may endure on occasion for several hours or days, or even longer. It is composed of the components of anxiety, distress, and increased physiological arousal that are frequently engendered in viewers as a result of exposure to specific types of media productions (Cantor, 1994).

8. Desensitization

The media can reduce our emotional reactions. For example, Grossman (1996) argues that television and movie violence is desensitizing the young. When children watch graphic violence in movies and TV shows and also play realistic violent video games, it breaks down their natural resistance to killing.

Children are being exposed to such media violence at earlier ages. "The average preschooler in America spends approximately 23 hours a week watching television before they [*sic*] even go to school, and that's not good," says Grossman (Sullivan, 1998, p. B1). "The net effect on children up to 4 or 5 years old is they can't tell the difference between television and reality," he said. "As far as they're concerned, when they see someone on TV being shot, stabbed, raped, kicked, brutalized, degraded, murdered, punched—it's as though it were actually happening." And, he said, "What we sow when the child is 2, 3, 4, 5 years old is what we reap 15 years later." Exposing children to media violence "is a form of child abuse," argues Grossman. "It is identical to what the military does in basic training. But instead of doing it with a drill sergeant on an 18-year-old volunteer, we're doing it to 3-year-olds over the public airwaves, in order for the networks to increase their ratings" (Sullivan, 1998, p. B1).

9. Catharsis

Catharsis is an effect that gives viewers release from their own aggressive drives when they vicariously participate in the violence that they see in drama. The idea of catharsis as an effect of exposure to entertaining messages goes back to the writings of Aristotle; the idea resurfaced with Freud and more recently with media effects researchers (Feshbach, 1972). Media portrayals of violence have been found to help people with weak imaginations experience catharsis, because these people have difficulty fantasizing (Feshbach, 1972). Also, people with well-developed imaginations are more able to become absorbed in violent portrayals and thereby discharge their anger (Gunter, 1980).

Catharsis is categorized here as an emotional effect, because it is usually experienced by people as a purging of negative emotions, such as fear or anger. But catharsis also has a physiological component, because catharsis can only work if a person is in a relatively high state of arousal. Without high arousal, there is no energy or drive to dissipate.

This is one effect that is regarded as very controversial by media effects researchers, with a few researchers claiming to have found support for this effect (Feshbach, 1955, 1961, 1972; Feshbach & Singer, 1971), whereas many other researchers have challenged this research (Berkowitz, 1962; Comstock et al., 1978; Liebert, Sobol, & Davidson, 1972; Wells, 1973). As of now, the research community is skeptical of such an effect, but this effect continues to have a great deal of intuitive appeal.

10. Immediate Creation or Change of Attitudes

A person's attitude can be created or changed with as little as a single exposure. For example, researchers have shown that when people are exposed to a violent television program, they will show an immediate drop in sympathetic attitude (Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Molitor & Hirsch, 1994; Thomas & Drabman, 1975). Among children and adults, even watching a single violent film can make people temporarily less aware of and less concerned about aggressive acts in others (Drabman & Thomas, 1974).

11. Learning Specific Acts and Lessons

If learning is defined as the acquisition of facts so that they can be recalled later, then exposure to media messages can certainly lead to an immediate learning effect. For example, when we watch the evening news we learn about which crimes were committed today.

Learning need not be planned—it can be incidental to the motive we have for media exposure. Incidental learning takes place when we do not intend to learn (maybe our motive is for entertainment) and when the sender of the messages is not intending for us to learn anything. For example, as we watch a movie we might learn how to defend ourselves with our fists or how to give someone we dislike a severely witty tongue lashing.

12. Learning Behaviors

People can learn behavior patterns by watching characters perform in the media. For example, children might watch a cartoon in which characters beat each other over the head with rubber hammers and show no harm. The children do not imitate the behavior patterns they see, because there are no rubber hammers available to them. But this does not mean they have not learned how to perform a particular aggressive behavioral sequence. Now let's say that the next day those children are in a toy store where they see some rubber hammers. Those hammers are likely to cue the memory of the cartoon. At that time, the children may pick up some hammers and begin hitting each other over the head; if they do, their behavior has been activated by their previous learning. But even if they do not hit each other over the head, they have still learned the behavioral sequence and its lack of consequences (Caprara et al., 1984).

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Long-term effects are those that do not show up during the exposure but build up slowly and subtly over time, which makes them harder to perceive. When we do see evidence of something that may be a long-term effect, it is relatively difficult to make a strong case to attribute the influence to the media, because it is difficult to envision all the links in the chain of events that connect the observed effect back to the accumulation of media exposures over years of viewing.

1. Generalizing to Novel Behaviors

The media can influence behaviors—not just in specific actions, but in a general, long-term manner (Comstock et al., 1978; McHan, 1985). The resulting effect can show up as behavior that is very different from any of the particular portrayals viewed by that person, because viewers can generalize from particular violent behaviors to a broader class of behaviors. For example, after watching multiple acts of physical violence in which the powerful physically subdue the weak, some people gradually alter their behavioral patterns to become more verbally aggressive.

2. Long-Term Triggering

Some researchers have hypothesized that television teaches people to commit criminal behavior—such as larceny—indirectly. For example, Hennigan and colleagues (1982) argue that exposure to affluent lifestyles on television along with high levels of advertising for consumer goods teaches viewers over time that in order to be happy in America (or even to be part of the mainstream), you need to attain a high level of materialism. Poor people who cannot buy many goods are being tempted to commit crimes in order to acquire more possessions. During the course of decades of watching portrayals of violence linked with materialism, people's levels of frustration and anger increase. Then one day, a person might be in a shopping center and begin shoplifting.

3. Malformed Superego

Freud (1933) conceptualized a superego that governs our primal drives. This superego is something that is acquired through experience as people learn

what is acceptable behavior in their society. One of the lessons imposed by the superego is the avoidance of aggression and violence.

Centerwall (1993a) argues that television, with its flood of violent messages, stunts a person's growth of superego:

Television is not merely a poor source for the child seeking to shape an ego ideal: it actively disrupts the process of superego formation, increasing the likelihood that the child will enter adulthood with a superego that is weak and poorly organized. Violence follows. (p. 192)

He points out several reasons why this is so. First, the messages of television are chaotic, so that a person is exposed "to as many different value systems as there are channels" (Centerwall, 1993a, p. 192). Centerwall (1993a) also says that television leaves to children the difficult task of synthesizing the values in all the messages they see. Also, television gives children no discipline or even any feedback on their behavior. Thus children are left to develop their super-ego in a moral vacuum.

4. Training Behavior

The media can shape our behavior by training us. For example, Grossman (1996) points out that one of the jobs of the military is to train soldiers to kill. He expresses alarm over seeing video games on the open market that are similar to the military's training simulations. Grossman argues that these first-person-shooter video games are training players how to kill other people by teaching hand-eye coordination so that players can be more skilled at shooting. The best killers receive the highest rewards. The worst of these games—Doom, 007 Golden Eye, Duke Nukem, Postal, Quake, and Redneck Rampage—are also the most popular (Grossman & DeGaetano, 1999). These games are fun and also give players a sense of power and provides immediate reinforcement (Healy, 1990). Over time, this reinforcement conditions players to seek out this type of action.

5. Physiological Habituation

This is the building up or increasing of physiological tolerance over the long term. With repeated fight-flight responses, the human body gradually builds up a resistance to the exposure to media violence. For example, the first time a person sees a horror film, the body responds with a fight-or-flight

reaction by substantially increasing the heart rate and blood pressure. As the person continues to view horror films over the years, the body's reaction to this stimulus is not as substantial: The heart rate and blood pressure still increase, but not as much. With repeated exposures, people build up a higher physiological tolerance to this type of message. In the extreme case, with massive exposure to this type of message, people might even extinguish all physiological reactions to horror. Researchers have found that children who are heavy users of TV (25 or more hours of viewing per week) are much less responsive to television violence in terms of physiological measures of arousal than are very light viewers, such as those who watch less than 4 hours per week (Cline, Croft, & Courier, 1973).

6. Narcotizing

Not only does habitual viewing of violence over time dull our reactions, some people continue to crave the strong "arousal jag" they used to get from violent exposures. Thus violence acts like a drug in the sense that people become more dependent on it over time. In its extreme case, this narcotic of violence can lead to addiction. Like with other narcotics, television violence loses its strength on users over time, so users need stronger doses to get the same pleasant feelings. In order to experience the same degree of arousal, they search out more graphic and stronger forms of violence (Zillmann, 1982).

This belief that media violence could act as a narcotic has been around for many decades. Blumer (1933) warned of media possession, in which viewers lose control over their feelings and perceptions. Preston (1941) asserted that people could become addicted to media horrors. Himmelweit, Swift, and Jaeger (1980) claimed that people can become as habituated to beatings and car chases as they can to barbiturates. They speculated that producers of empty excitement action series "might be tempted to increase the dosage and opt for even more violent happenings . . . but this could be self-defeating since habituation to the new level might soon set in" (p. 95).

New York Times columnist Frank Rich (1998) likens the public's taste for media violence to an addiction and says that the media are just giving the public what it wants. According to Rich, video games are especially addictive—providing a drug-like response—so playing is exciting.

Murray Straus, who has studied patterns of violence in American families for decades as director of the Family Research Laboratory of the University of New Hampshire, provides support for this characterization of media violence

as an addictive drug. He explains that "people get inducted into violence in infancy. Since probably half of all children have been hit by their parents as infants, before speech, it just becomes built into the personality" (Robb, 1991, p. 27). People then look to the media to continue with violence, but media violence loses its shock value fairly rapidly, researchers have found, so more and more violence is needed to maintain the thrill.

7. Emotional Habituation

Some portrayals are presented so often we can no longer treat them with wonder or awe. Our tolerance has been increased so that those things that used to horrify or even upset us no longer do. This is especially important with the issue of violence. Viewing TV violence leads to lowered sensitivity to aggression and violence, and when people are exposed to violence continuously for a long period of time, this lowering of sensitivity is reinforced.

Exposure to a great deal of violence can lead to a lack of remorse. In 1993 in Houston, Texas, two teenage girls (14 and 16) were walking home one summer evening when they were attacked by six teenage boys (aged 14 to 18) who raped and murdered them. The youths offered no explanation for their crimes, nor did they show any remorse. One of the suspects had been featured in a television news report on gangs in Houston the night before the crime. In that news report, the suspect lifted a beer can and made a toast, saying, "Human life means nothing" ("Houston Knows Murder," 1993). In this case, the youth was emotionally dead; extreme violence, even murder, could no longer evoke an emotional response in him. Another example is from an interview on National Public Radio with a teenage gang member who, without a shred of remorse, said he would kill without a second thought. He and his friends had seen *The Terminator* and for months afterward were pumped up, wanting to be just like that movie's futuristic murder machine.

Some have made the argument that watching a great deal of television stunts a child's emotional development. Children experience high levels of exposure to television—by the time a child reaches the age of 5, he or she has been exposed to about 6,000 hours of television. Couple this with the average image being on the screen only about 3.5 seconds before being replaced with another, then another. This leaves no time for reflection. This frenetic pacing short-circuits the natural emotional development that people need to become healthy human beings; it strangles the development of children's own voices and denies them their imaginative powers:

Some neuro-anatomists argue that excessive TV viewing—more than four or five hours per day, seven days a week—ultimately takes a serious cognitive toll. They believe the limbic system of the brain—the mysterious, sub-cortical part of the brain that researchers designate as the image-making center—develops more slowly when a young person spends half of his or her waking life in front of the TV set. (Sanders, 1994, p. 39)

Also, TV presents so many images to viewers that viewers do not have to generate their own images; they do not practice "what-if" situations and thinking things through. They can't even fully process much of what they do experience on TV—there is too much. Viewing weakens their will. TV takes over and gives them all their excitement; people don't have to generate their own entertainment any longer (Sanders, 1994, p. 42).

One of the explanations for emotional habituation is that when people spend more and more time with pseudo-emotional connections with fictional characters in the media, they build up less experience with emotions in the real world. Television viewing makes people think they are experiencing emotions, but these are not real because they are not two-way emotions—that is, there is no interaction. Viewers cannot influence the behavior of TV characters, so there is no emotional exchange. Emotions require physicality, that is, people to touch each other; TV does not provide this. Without adequate emotional development, people do not develop a sense of guilt or conscience (Sanders, 1994, p. 125).

On the positive side, people can also become desensitized to the things they fear through repeated exposure to these violent characters and actions in the media. For example, experimenters have shown that gradual, repeated showing of frightening material in a nonthreatening environment can gradually reduce children's fear of particular characters, such as the Incredible Hulk (Cantor & Sparks, 1984; Sparks & Cantor, 1986) or the Wizard of Oz (Cantor & Wilson, 1984; Wilson, Hoffner, & Cantor, 1987).

8. Long-Term Reinforcement of Attitudes and Beliefs

Because the media provide so many messages of violence and because those messages are usually presented with the same cluster of contextual factors, viewers' existing attitudes about violence are reinforced over time. This is a consistent conclusion of many research studies (Cline et al., 1973; Drabman & Thomas, 1974; Greenberg, 1975; Kaplan & Singer, 1976; Thomas & Drabman, 1975; Thomas, Horton, Lippincott, & Drabman, 1977).

9. Cultivation of Fear

There is a good deal of research support for the hypothesis that heavy exposure to the world of television, which is saturated with violent portrayals, leads people to construct unrealistically high estimates of risk of victimization and a corresponding belief that the world is a mean and violent place (Bryant, Carveth, & Brown, 1981; Carveth & Alexander, 1985; Gerbner et al., 1977; Hawkins & Pingree, 1980, 1981a, 1981b; Morgan, 1983, 1986; Ogles & Hoffner, 1987; Potter, 1991; Rouner, 1984; Signorielli, 1990; Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986; Wober, 1978; Zillmann & Wakshlag, 1985).

The person who first established the existence of this effect, George Gerbner, argues that television presents a mean-world syndrome that cultivates "feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and mistrust, and—despite its supposedly 'entertaining' nature—alienation and gloom." He contends that violence is used to define social relations between characters. "Some kids see themselves as more likely to be victims than other kids, and they develop a greater sense of vulnerability." In his research, he found that heavy viewers were more likely to call for severe punishments for criminals and to have bought new locks, watchdogs, and guns for protection (Leland, 1995).

Gerbner's original conceptualization of cultivation in the late 1960s was based on the assumption that all messages were the same across the television landscape. Therefore, it did not matter what people watched, only how much they watched. As the television landscape has changed over time, with many more channels and specialized niche programming, subsequent research has demonstrated that it matters what a person watches. People who watch programming with more violence will be more cultivated to believe the world is a mean and violent place (Hawkins & Pingree, 1981a; Potter, 1991), as are people whose viewing is dominated by violent programming (Potter & Chang, 1990).

The argument has been made convincingly that the media have created a moral panic with all their coverage of crime and violence. For example, Chiricos (1996) points out that in the early 1990s there was a particular fixation on high-profile crimes in the national news media and that during that time the percentage of Americans ranking crime and violence as the nation's foremost problem jumped from 9% to 49%.

Alton (1994) writes that there is a serious problem of fear in Britain, "where women are frightened to travel alone on public transport in the evening or leave their children alone in a public park." He contrasts this with 20 years ago, when people felt safe to walk the streets and the parks. "We call this a

free and permissive age—but what has happened to true freedom and the things we were once permitted to do without fear?"

Fear of victimization is widespread in the United States. There are 192 million guns in private hands in this country; 46% of those owners say the reason they have a gun is for self-defense—perhaps that is why 65 million of those guns are not rifles or shotguns but handguns (Simon, 2001, p. A5).

10. Generalizing Patterns

A person watches a local news program and hears a story about a house that was vandalized in an area near his apartment. Then he hears a story on radio about a local bank that was robbed. Next he reads the newspaper and sees that there was an assault in his town last night. He has learned three facts—one from each message. But later that night he might generalize from these three facts and draw a conclusion that the crime rate is very high in his town. This specific conclusion was not given to him by the media, but the media provided him with some facts that set up his jump to this conclusion.

The mass media have been found to provide consistent messages that lead viewers to construct generalizations about how much crime and violence there is in society (Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, & Signorielli, 1978; Hawkins & Pingree, 1982; Potter, 1994). Sometimes this generalization process results in a conclusion that is very much unlike the real world. When this happens, one of three conditions exists: (a) the person has acquired false information from the media, (b) the person has been exposed to an imbalance of information (extreme depth in one narrow area and no breadth) and this gives a distorted picture, or (c) the person has accumulated a great number of facts and has not properly sorted or organized them.

11. Learning Social Norms

The learning of social norms is a special case of generalizing patterns. People can generalize a pattern from individual media exposures without that pattern being a social norm. For example, through repeated exposure to media violence, a person overestimates the rate of crime and the percentage of crimes that are cleared by an arrest. Although these are generalizations, they are not social norms. Social norms are generalized patterns from social information, rather than factual information. Social norms deal more with the rules of behavior in social situations rather than with society's factual parameters, such

as the numbers of lawyers, crimes, trials, and executions—all of which have real factual indicators. But social norms have no factual foundation in the sense that they are either accurate or not.

As people gradually construct their generalizations about social norms from viewing individual media portrayals of violence, they look at how that violence is portrayed. For example, viewers have been found to generalize to a social norm that violence is OK to use in certain situations when they frequently see it justified in those situations (Collins, 1973; Hoffner & Cantor, 1985; Kaplan & Singer, 1976; Leifer & Roberts, 1972; Linne, 1971; Siegel, 1958; Thomas & Drabman, 1978).

Also, the sheer repetition of violent portrayals is enough to lead people to generalize that violence is a typical way of dealing with problems in society. This is why there is a relationship between the amount of exposure to TV violence and a willingness to use violence, to suggest violence as a solution to conflict, and to perceive violence as being effective (Liebert et al., 1973; Tan, 1981).

12. Programming Us How to Think

Young brains are being programmed differently because of the stimulation of television. In their book *Stop Teaching Our Kids to Kill*, David Grossman and Gloria DeGaetano (1999) argue that media violence weakens our ability to react properly to violent messages, rather like AIDs weakens a person's physical immune system. Grossman and DeGaetano say that "AVIDS" ("Acquired Violence Immune Deficiency Syndrome") "weakens appropriate cognitive, emotional, and social development, causing more children to become increasingly vulnerable to other violence-enabling factors in our society such as poverty, discrimination, drugs, and the availability of guns" (p. 64).

The brain development that occurs between the ages of 0 and 6 is phenomenal. And an overemphasis on any particular activity robs children of the opportunity to do a range of activities, which is so important to building neural networks. Many things that adults see as play are very important for children. When they bounce a ball, they are learning hand-eye coordination, muscle coordination, and the elementary rules of physics. If they are doing it with a friend, they are learning to read cues of socialization. A well-loved video can seem like a friend. But a parent must ask: Is this a good friend, and are the visits in moderation? (Churnin, 1998).

13. Moving the Mean of Society Toward More of a Fight-Flight Mentality

Envision the aggregate of society arrayed as a normal distribution, with most people clustered in the center in terms of their socialized beliefs and behaviors regarding violence. On one side of the distribution (the prosocial tail) are the people who have a very high degree of inhibition preventing them from behaving aggressively; also, these people have a high degree of sensitivity to violence and sympathy for all its victims. On the opposite side of the distribution (the antisocial tail) are the people who have very low inhibitions toward behaving aggressively; also, these people have very low levels of sympathy for victims of violence.

When violence permeates the media year after year in all kinds of programming and when the message of that violence is antisocial (violence is usually justified, successful, and harmless to victims), the mean of society is likely to move gradually in the antisocial direction. That is, the norms of society (as evidenced by the beliefs and behaviors clustered close to the mean) will show a gradual movement in the direction toward a fight-flight mentality. The fight component is exhibited by an erosion of inhibitions to behaving in a violent manner. The flight component is exhibited by a gradual increase in generalized fear along with an erosion of sympathy for victims of violence.

When television is introduced into a country, there is an increase in the violence and crime rate in that country, especially crimes of theft (Campbell & Keogh, 1962; Centerwall, 1989; Furu, 1962, 1971; Halloran, Brown, & Chaney, 1970; Hennigan et al., 1982; Schramm et al., 1961; Williams, 1986). Within a country, there is also a relationship between the amount of exposure to violence that a demographic group typically experiences in the media and the crime rate in neighborhoods where those demographic groups are concentrated (Messner, 1986). Finally, there is some evidence that when a high-profile violent act is depicted in the news or in fictional programming, incidents of criminal aggression increase subsequent to that coverage (Phillips & Hensley, 1984). These studies have been criticized for demonstrating only covariation, not causation. That is, merely because two things occur at the same time does not mean that one has caused the other. That is one of the biggest challenges of conducting this type of broad-scale research. It is very difficult to make convincing claims for causation, because there are usually many alternative influences that could be responsible for the effect.

Societies have drawn a line out on the antisocial tail that divides socially tolerated antisocial behavior (such as rudeness, selfish aggression, etc.) from antisocial behavior that the society cannot tolerate (usually labeled as criminal behavior, for which society has prescribed clear penalties). All societies have a few people with extreme deviant behavior—that is, those people who have crossed the line set by society.

As the entire distribution shifts more toward a fight-flight mentality (antisocial direction), not only are there observable differences in the mean, but there are also observable differences at the tails of the distribution. As the antisocial tail also moves to more of a fight-flight mentality, there are more people on that tail who have crossed the line. Also, it takes even more outrageous behavior to label someone truly deviant.

One example of moving the mean is that a very violent movie such as *Home Alone 2* is categorized as a “family” film. Violence in movies and on television has desensitized children so much that they laugh at human suffering, while their point-and-shoot video games have conditioned them to act out aggression. We have all gotten to the point where it takes much more to shock us. The boundary that defines civil behavior has moved.

14. Changing Institutions

When violence permeates the media year after year in all kinds of programming and when the message of that violence is antisocial, institutions feel the influence and gradually change. For example, the criminal justice system experiences stronger conflicting forces. On the one side is greater fear in society, which leads to asking this institution to be more aggressive in removing deviants from society and thus to reduce the fear. On the other side is a greater tolerance for many forms of deviant behavior that have become relatively less threatening to society (thefts and assaults) compared with other more deviant acts (such as bombing public buildings, sending letter bombs to individuals’ homes, and teenage snipers killing classmates in public schools).

In a larger sense, the entire institution of government seems to be changing as a result of these conflicting forces. On the one hand, the public is asking government for more personal freedom, perhaps as a way of getting back some of their lives, which they perceive as being taken away by their increasing fear of others. But on the other hand, the public asks for a more authoritarian response (more laws, more law enforcement personnel, and stronger punishments) to the shifts in society.

The educational system has also changed to deal with the stronger fight-flight mentality among students. Instead of being able to operate at higher levels, where students can concentrate on more abstract ideas, teachers must respond to more basic concerns of students concerned about survival.

Religion may be changing as people turn to that institution more out of a generalized fear or out of a rejection of the changing norms of society. Also, religions may be more aggressive at drawing the line of acceptable behaviors in order to stop the shift of society in an antisocial direction. Thus religion becomes more concerned with moral issues than spiritual ones. The focus may be shifting more toward prescribing everyday behaviors and away from focusing on the awe and mystery of creation and humans’ place in the universe and eternity.

The institution of family may also be changing as a result of these forces brought about by media violence. Perhaps the generalized fear has made parents less trusting of their children. Perhaps couples are less willing to deal with their arguments by looking for peaceful solutions and being willing to compromise. Instead, couples may be looking for more fights to act on their aggressive impulses, may feel more justified in those confrontations, and thus may want to dominate the other in their resolutions. Such adversarial behaviors are likely to lead to more breakups and more people choosing to live alone.

CONCLUSIONS

The myth that violence in the media affects others but not me will continue as long as people have a narrow perspective on what is a negative effect. A narrow perspective includes only those things that show up in other people and those things that usually occur immediately after the exposure. Until people understand that there is a wide variety of effects—many of them subtle and many that take a long time to manifest themselves—people will continue with their limited range of awareness. People need to be made aware of the variety of negative effects on their behavior, physiology, emotions, attitudes, and knowledge—especially those that manifest themselves only after repeated exposures over a long time. As long as people use a very small radar screen to scan for the occurrence of negative effects in their lives, they will continue to miss most of them.

The 11 MYTHS *of* MEDIA VIOLENCE

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