THE 11 MYTHS

1. Violence in the media does not affect me, but others are at high risk.
2. The media are not responsible for the negative effects of their violent messages.
3. Children are especially vulnerable to the risks of negative exposure to media violence.
4. There is too much violence in the media.
5. Violence in the media reflects violence in society.
6. The media are only responding to market desires.
7. Violence is an essential element in all fiction.
8. Reducing the amount of violence in the media will solve the problem.
9. The First Amendment protects the media from restrictions on violence.
10. The rating systems and V-chip will help solve the problem.
11. There is nothing I can do to make an effect on reducing the problem.

ONE

CURRENT CONTEXT

The problem of media violence has been with us for as long as we have had mass media. From the earliest days, storytellers have been presenting conflict in the form of violence, and the public has sought out these stories. As each new medium has come on the scene and consumed more of the population's attention, exposure to violence in the media has grown, and along with the exposure, criticism of the violence has also grown. With the arrival of the medium of television into most American households during the 1950s, criticism of media violence became widespread throughout the population. The U.S. Congress picked up on public concern 50 years ago and began holding official hearings on the problem—and those hearings continue up until today. The problem attracted scores of researchers who conducted studies to determine the nature of violence in the media and its potential effects on the population. Despite all this activity and concern, the problem is still with us today; we are no closer to a solution or even an amelioration. Why?

In this book, I will show that the persistence of this problem can be traced to the context in which it has grown. This context is an arena in which four players—the public, producers, policymakers, and researchers—have grappled with this issue in a largely adversarial manner. The primary conflict is between the public and the producers of media violence. The other two groups—policymakers and researchers—have over time been moved into roles to facilitate this conflict.

If all four groups had the same goal and worked together cooperatively, we would likely have seen movement toward a solution. But the groups have

had different goals. The public is motivated by a fear that vulnerable elements in society—such as children and unstable people—are being influenced by violent portrayals to learn how to commit crimes and are being stimulated to act on their aggressive drives. The public wants the federal government to exercise some sort of control over producers in order to reduce these risks. Producers are motivated to maximize their profits, which requires them to create programming that they believe will attract the largest audiences.

The other two groups—policymakers and researchers—are facilitators of this central struggle between the public and producers. Policymakers provide a forum for the other three groups to air their concerns. Over the past five decades there have been 28 major hearings by Congress—in addition to less formal sessions—to discuss this problem. Throughout this time, policymakers have been successful at keeping the issue on the public's agenda of problems, but they have not had much success in brokering a compromise that could bring about more of a balance of power and hence a greater sharing of goals.

Researchers have generated a great deal of potentially useful information, but little of that potential has been realized. One finding—that exposure to violence in the media puts people at risk for behaving more aggressively—has worked its way into the public's knowledge base. But there is little evidence that the public, much less producers and policymakers, realizes that there is a broad spectrum of risks or understands the process of influence that can alter those risks. So much of what the public thinks it "knows" about the issue of media violence is based not on factual evidence but on intuitively derived opinions. Researchers have been far more successful at generating valid information about the nature and effects of media violence than they have been at getting the public, policymakers, and producers to understand or accept that information.

Because the goals of the groups differ, each group argues louder in the hopes that its voice will be heard and convince the other groups that its goals are more important than the goals of the other groups. However, as all groups raise their voices, the noise level gets louder, and the ability to understand the other groups gets lost. Frustration builds, and we are locked in a situation where no one really hears or understands the values of the people in the other groups. The players think they know what the other groups are saying, but this is a misperception that leads to misinformation, which then circulates and takes on a life of its own. People accept this misinformation, blend it with their intuitions, and use this dangerous mix to create their opinions.

THE PUBLIC

Over the past several decades, many public opinion leaders have spoken out against media violence (see Table 1.1). Public opinion polls show that the people generally are critical of the media, because they feel there is too much violence in the media and that this violence is causing harmful effects (see Table 1.2).

Although the belief that the media are causing a harmful effect is widespread in the public, knowledge about the nature of the negative effects and how they work seems to be lacking. A good illustration of the misinformed nature of the topic among well-meaning people occurred just after the shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in the spring of 1999. This horrible event triggered national news coverage that lasted for weeks. This gave columnists a chance to write about violence in our society. One example is John Leo, who writes a weekly column for *U.S. News & World Report*. In his column titled "The Devil With Ms. Jones," Leo (1999a) railed against violence in the media, especially in video games. By arguing for the elimination of violence in the media, his intention was clearly to stir up controversy and elicit strong reactions from readers, which he did. Two weeks after Leo's column appeared, *U.S. News & World Report* published five letters to the editor in response to that column. The ideas expressed in Leo's column and in the five responses provide a good illustration of what is wrong with public opinion on the issue of media violence. Each presents a sliver of insight but misses the bigger picture, so each is faulty not because of what it says but because of what it leaves unsaid. Each is a sound byte that entices the imagination but has little—or misleading—informational value. In one of the reaction letters, the writer chides Leo for blaming the media, saying, "We are a country full of finger pointers. When tragedies occur, we blame the media, the movie industry, the video game industry—the list goes on and on. However, no one bothers to look in the most obvious place, the mirror." Of course, the writer is correct that the adolescent shooters at Littleton had the power to control their actions and should be held responsible. But this should not mean that the media had no role in shaping their values and behaviors. The media should not be regarded as blameless merely because there are also other sources of blame. This is an example of partial understanding. We need to get past the limitation of searching for single causes—life is more complicated than that. There are many factors that shape who we are, and the media are an important—but not the sole—factor in that shaping.

(Text continues on page 7)

Table 1.1 Opinion Leaders Perceive Harm

Public Health Groups

1976	American Medical Association's House of Delegates declares violence an "environmental hazard."
1984	The American Academy of Pediatrics Task Force on Children and Television releases a report cautioning physicians and parents that television may promote aggressive behavior.
1985	The American Psychological Association Commission on Youth Violence releases a report linking television violence and real-world violence.
1992	The American Psychological Association calls for a federal policy to protect the public from the harms of televised violence.
1993	The American Psychological Association says, "There is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of viewing violence on television are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behavior. In addition to increasing violent behaviors toward others, viewing violence on television changes attitudes and behaviors toward violence in significant ways" (p. 33).
1995	The American Academy of Pediatrics, which represents 48,000 pediatricians, says the evidence is clear: Violence in entertainment makes some children more aggressive, desensitizes them to real-life violence, and makes them feel they live in a mean and dangerous world. "There's no debate. There is clearly a relationship between media violence and violence in the community," says Vic Strasburger, author of the pediatricians' statement and chief of pediatrics at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. Dr. Strasburger continues, "We are basically saying the controversy is over. There is clearly a relationship between media violence and violence in society" ("Doctor's Push," 1995, p. A16). Similar statements are also released by the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Public Health Association, and the National Association of Attorneys General.
1996	The American Medical Association says, "An extensive body of research amply documents a strong correlation between children's exposure to media violence and a number of behavioral and psychological problems, primarily aggressive behavior. The evidence further shows that these problems are caused by the exposure itself" (American Medical Association, 1996).

Table 1.1 Continued

Government Leaders

1969	The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence issues a report stating that exposure to television increases physical aggression.
1972	The U.S. Surgeon General issues a report on violence stating a causal link between violent behavior and violence on television and motion pictures.
1982	A National Institute of Mental Health report confirms a link between television violence and aggressive behavior.
1984	The Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence releases a report claiming that television violence contributes to actual violence.
1991	Deborah Prothrow-Stith, the former Massachusetts commissioner of public health, writes in her book about youth and violence, *Deadly Consequences,* "Children who watch a great deal of violent TV are desensitized to the wrongness of what they are seeing" (Robb, 1991, p. 27).
1993	Attorney General Janet Reno supports the regulation of violence on television, saying that in her opinion, "TV violence legislation will pass constitutional muster" (McAvoy & Coe, 1993, p. 6).
1994	Reed Hundt, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), announces an agenda to support restrictions on violent content on television, saying that the violence children view "affects their behavior negatively to some measurable and meaningful degree" (Eggerton, 1995).
1995	Former Sen. Bob Dole (R-KS), running for President, says that cultural messages affect "the hearts and minds of our young people." Sen. Paul Simon (D-IL) says, "We are past questions on the research" (Leland, 1995, p. 16). Sen. Ernest Hollings (D-SC) calls the situation a "crisis," because each year hundreds of millions of people witness thousands of deaths. Killing for romance, killing for sex, killing for dinner, and killing for time are just some of the money-making themes coming out of Hollywood (Lutterbeck, 1995). Newton Minow, former chairman of the FCC, reflecting on the research studies about media violence, says, "All of them consistently show that television violence contributes to real violence" (Minow & LeMay, 1995, p. 28).
1996	Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II (D-MA) says, "Study after study has shown that television violence causes aggressive and violent behavior in children who watch it. Despite this growing body of evidence, TV and cable companies continue to broadcast murders, rapes, and gratuitous violence into our living rooms" (Kennedy, 1996).

(Continued)

Table 1.1 Continued

1998	Vice President Al Gore says, "Numerous national experts have demonstrated that children who do view a large amount of TV violence are significantly more likely to exhibit aggressive behavior." He continues, "There's really no serious controversy about that linkage" (Jones, 1998, p. 1).
2001	In January, U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher says, "Exposure to violent media plays an important causal role in this societal problem of youth violence." He adds that repeated exposure to violent entertainment during early childhood causes more aggressive behavior throughout a child's life (Leeds, 2001, p. A1).

Consumer Action Groups

1975	The National Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) adopts a resolution demanding that networks and local television stations reduce the amount of violence in programming.
1980	The National Coalition on Television Violence is formed.
1994	Barbara Hattemer, president of the National Family Association, says that television teaches "that violence is an everyday occurrence and an acceptable way of solving problems" (1994, p. 360).
1996	The National Foundation to Improve Television (a reform group in Boston) says, "Three different Surgeons General, the U.S. Attorney General's Task Force on Family Violence, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, and many others have spoken out about the dangers of television violence" (National Foundation to Improve Television, 1996).
1999	William Bennett, head of Empower America, says, "Almost no one, except for a few blinded by financial stakes, thinks that the popular culture is not having a coarsening effect on our kids." He adds, "The evidence, empirical and anecdotal, is overwhelming." He says that there is an "inescapable logic" that a culture brimming with violence does in fact beget violence (Stern, 1999a). Dr. James E. Savage Jr., director of the Institute for Life Enrichment in Washington, D.C., which focuses on problems of black men, agrees that exposure to violence can lead people to violent behavior. "There's an unconscious part of ourselves that tends to sometimes become uncontrolled," he says. "Society has a lot of loose boundaries as it relates to violence, and it permits this to manifest."

Table 1.1 Continued

Religious Leaders

1985	The National Council of Churches of Christ says that the results of the congressional hearings and research reports indicate a clear causal relationship between television violence and aggressive behavior and that the broadcast industry's demands for absolute proof of such a relationship are "self serving and unprincipled" (Parley, 1985).
1994	Pope John Paul II says that much of the content on television is excessively violent and harmful to the world society.
1995	Rev. Don Wildmon, head of the 1.9 million-member American Family Association, says, "We are beyond a crisis. "We are at the stage of serious business now because [media violence] is affecting everybody" (Lutterbeck, 1995).

Another letter was from a 16-year-old Ohio boy who also complained that Leo was blaming the media. He wrote, "These two [the perpetrators of the Littleton massacre] were obsessed with such things because of latent violent tendencies, not the other way around." He continued, saying that movies and games "are not a whetstone to turn dull male adolescent angst into cold-blooded homicide." This writer sets himself up as the perpetrators' psychologist. How can a person who never met these boys be so sure that things are the other way around? Perhaps things are as the writer guesses, but shouldn't we be more careful to find out first before acting so sure?

Another writer complained that Leo "blurs the lines between reality and fantasy." He says, "It cannot be violence and killing in a video game or in a movie if you are not killing or harming anything that is real. If I take a stick and beat a brick with it, am I killing the brick or committing violence against it? No, of course not. And yet pseudo characters in the video games and the movies are even less real than the brick." This writer exhibits the problem that he himself is complaining about—that is, he blurs the distinction between reality and fantasy. Of course the video game characters themselves are fantasy, but the people who play the games are real people. The playing of a violent video game is not fully contained within a realm of pure fantasy, nor does it take place in the realm of pure reality. The game playing illustrates the interplay between the two. As people learn how to play the game and win, they generalize from those fantasy-generated experiences. We constantly use the lessons learned from the media to guide our actions in real life.

Table 1.2 Public Perceives Harm

1977	A Gallup poll reports that 70% of those polled say there is a relationship between violence on television and the rising U.S. crime rate (Oldenburg & Snider, 1999).
1993	A Gallup poll finds that 88% of respondents say television has either an "important" or "critical" effect on crime. A *Los Angeles Times* poll conducted in 1993 finds that 79% of respondents think there is a connection between television entertainment and viciousness in real life ("Most Believe," 1993). A *Times Mirror* poll finds that 78% agree that media violence is a factor in the breakdown of law and order (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999, p. 238).
1994	A *U.S. News & World Report* poll finds that 92% of Americans think TV contributes to violence in this country, and 65% think that entertainment programs on television have a negative influence on American life (U.S. News & World Report Online, 1994). In a *Parents* magazine poll, 73% agree that "the depiction of violence in the movies, on TV, and so forth is the cause of increased acts of violence in our society" (Diamant, 1994, p. 40).
1995	A Time/CNN survey finds that 76% of those polled say they believe violence numbs people and makes them insensitive to violence; 75% say it inspires young people to commit violence; and 71% say it has the effect of making people believe that violence is fun and acceptable (Lacayo, 1995). A Gallup poll reports that 75% believe there is a relationship between television violence and the nation's crime rate (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999, p. 223). A *New York Times* poll finds that 56% of those polled believe that media violence contributes to teenage violence.
1997	A *Los Angeles Times* poll finds that 70% say they believe that violence on television causes people to behave violently occasionally; this is an increase from 58% holding such a belief in 1989 (Lowry, 1997).
1999	A week after the April 20, 1999, shooting at Columbine High School, a *USA Today* poll finds that 73% of the public say TV and movies share at least a little of the blame for teen crimes (Oldenburg & Snider, 1999). The Annenberg Public Policy Center conducts a survey several weeks after the Littleton shootings and reports that most parents are "deeply fearful" about the Web's influence on their children (Oldenburg & Snider, 1999).
1999	When asked if various media contribute to crime in the United States, 92% say they believed television does; 92% say movies do; 82% say video games do; and 81% say local television news does (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999a).

A fourth writer argued that the playing of violent games can have a positive effect. He says, "Violent games (for the majority of people) do not encourage violent behavior. They provide an escape valve for naturally occurring violent tendencies. A good Quake death match is an excellent way to boil off excess stress and frustration." The author, of course, is correct that some people can experience a reduction of aggression by boiling off "excess stress" while playing a violent game. But a catharsis is only one of many effects that could result from playing a highly violent game. For example, in using Quake as a vicarious escape valve for violent tendencies, players might be desensitizing themselves to violence so that over time they lose sympathy for victims.

Finally, a philosophy professor argued that there is much violence in literature and asks, "Would he [Leo] want to restrict teenagers' access to it?" Illustrated here is the problem of regarding all violence as the same and ignoring the context. The context of a Quake game is very different from the context of violence in a fictional narrative in the control of a great author. Playing the Quake game trains people to react quickly with fight-flight reactions and reinforces the mind*less* aggressive response. Encountering violence in a great novel leads readers to think about the nature of violence and to be mind*ful* of its consequences.

Each of these letter writers, as well as Leo himself in his column, make important points about our exposure to violence in the media and its influence on us. But each is limited by his or her narrow perspective. These limitations color what the letter writers say and render their insights naive. Although this set of letters is only one example, it illustrates many of the problems with the general thinking about media violence. It shows a lack of understanding that there are many effects of violence, that the media are an important part (but not the only part) of the process of influencing the effect, that context is more important than the violence itself, that fantasy experiences can have an effect on how we view reality, and perhaps most important, that we need good information in place of intuitive speculation.

In summary, the public is motivated to reduce risks to themselves and especially to their children, but their idea of risk is flawed. The public has a very narrow perspective on the range of negative effects that can—and do—occur from exposure to media violence. The public is concerned primarily about aggressive behavior coming from other people. They do not understand all the negative effects that are possible—and that are probably happening

to them. They do not understand how they can protect themselves apart from asking the federal government to do something to reduce the amount of violence in the media.

PRODUCERS

Producers of media violence work for businesses that seek to buy and present programming designed to attract as large an audience as possible. Larger audiences mean higher revenues. When the media businesses can maximize revenues and minimize expenses, they create large profits, and this is their primary purpose for doing business. Violent portrayals are believed to be attractive to large numbers of people and are at the same time relatively inexpensive to produce. Given this entrenched belief, people in the media industries feel threatened when people outside those industries subject them to any kind of criticism and pressure them to reduce the use of violence. When those critics argue that the marketing of violent entertainment and information is harmful to the general population, producers counter that evidence does not exist to support the critics' claim. The industry has always responded with this argument, and this response continues to this day, usually in one of three forms: denial, shifting the blame, and defensive actions.

Denial

In the aftermath of the April 20, 1999, incident in Littleton, Colorado, in which two teenage boys shot and killed 12 of their fellow high school students and a teacher before taking their own lives, criticism flared up again. Many people were blaming the media for presenting so much violence, and many in the media were again avoiding any responsibility for negative effects. For example, the heads of two of the world's largest media corporations, Time Warner CEO Gerald Levin and Seagram CEO Edgar Bronfman Jr., denied any blame for influencing the behavior of teenagers who kill one another and even expressed contempt for the idea and for the critics who make such claims (Stern, 1999b).

Denial comes in many forms. One form of denial is to denounce claims that violence in the media has a negative effect. For example, Wes Craven, director of horror movies such as *Scream* and *Nightmare on Elm Street,* says

he does not believe his movies could influence children to recreate such violence in their lives ("*Scream 3* Director," 1999). Also, Fox's executive vice president, George Vradenburg, asserts, "I think most in the television business do not accept the view that what we put on television, what is on over the air, is contributing in any significant measure to violence in society" (Brennan, 1995, p. Y6).

Another form of denial is for people to concede that there are negative effects—but not from the violence on *their* show. Jerry Springer said that although he does agree that the violence in the media contributes to violence in society, he does not believe that his show contributes to violence in society. Springer reasons that his viewers would *not* imitate the violence on his program, because his violence is not glorified like it is in the movies:

> You know, as long as the people that do the fighting and shoot the guns and blow up the buildings are great-looking movie stars and, you know, then we love it. But if it's a show like ours where everyone doesn't look like Arnold Schwarzenegger or Bruce Willis or what have you, and they don't have the big guns that blow people away or the bombs that blow up the big buildings, as long as it's not that, but it's the people who are on our show, all of a sudden we say, Ooh, that's awful, that's disgusting. (*Good Morning America,* 1999)

Springer is certainly right that his guests are not glamorous. But a glamorous role model is not the only factor that can stimulate imitation. If Springer were able to move out of denial, he would realize that viewers are much more likely to imitate the type of violence they see on his show than the violence in an Arnold Schwarzenegger film. It is easier to attack your friends verbally than it is to stab or shoot them.

Another form of denial is for industry people to argue that they are solid citizens and would never produce harmful programming. They claim that they have strong family values just like the people who criticize them. For example, Dick Wolf, producer of *Law & Order,* said that most people in Hollywood have children and nuclear families, which makes them share the concerns of everyday Americans. Also, Sandy Grushow, president of 20th Century Fox Television, which produces shows like the *X-Files* and *The Simpsons,* said that if people throughout the country had contact with Hollywood producers and programmers, they would realize that television executives share the values of "America at large."

A deeper form of denial is to argue that the media do not present violence. For example, Richard Donner, director of the *Lethal Weapon* movies, *Superman, The Omen,* and *The Goonies,* among others, said, "If people see gratuitous violence in any of the *Lethal Weapon* movies, I wonder if they've seen the same movie." He congratulates himself on being socially responsible: "I brought social issues into the *Lethal Weapon* movies, like when Danny Glover's family comes down on him for eating tuna, or the 'Stamp out the NRA' sign up in the LA police station. In the last one the daughter wears a pro-choice T-shirt" (Krasny, 1993). Apparently Donner believes that one scene that has a character wearing a T-shirt with a slogan can affect the audience but that dozens of scenes of violence will have no effect. Also, it is interesting to note that Donner is proud of sending a message to protect the rights of tuna fish, while he ignores what his action scenes are telling the audience about how we should treat humans.

Yet another form of denial is to claim that the amount of violence is decreasing. Jack Valenti said, "I think that what the networks have done in the past 18 months, which is to measurably reduce the amount of violence on TV, is fantastic" (Eggerton, 1995, p. 13). Valenti based his conclusion on the results of a three-year study financed by the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB). This NAB study reported that in its first year of analysis, there were eight television programs that contained violence worthy of concern and that by the second year, the number had dropped to four programs. What Valenti did not acknowledge were the findings of the National Television Violence Study (NTVS), which was conducted at the same time as the NAB study and which examined the same three years of programming across the same channels as the NAB study. Perhaps Valenti ignored the NTVS findings because they were very different from the NAB findings. In the first year of its analyses, the NTVS examined over 2,500 television programs and found violence in 58% of those programs. Furthermore, the NTVS found that the average number of violent acts per hour of television was almost seven. As for changes across years, the NTVS study reported that the percentage of programs with violence went up slightly, to 61% in Years 2 and 3 of the study. Broadcasters, of course, preferred the results of the study they financed, so they had to deny the results of the NTVS. For example, Marty Franks, senior vice president of CBS, strongly disputed the NTVS study, saying, "This study persists in using the same flawed methodology that led several years ago to the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Laugh-In* being named that

year's most violent program by simply counting acts of violence without taking dramatic context into account" (Aversa, 1999, p. 3A). It is hard to imagine a more inaccurate statement about NTVS. The entire foundation of the NTVS study was the importance of dramatic context. This study collected information on eight measures of context (such as justification, motives, degree of harm to victim, etc.) for *each* of the 18,000 acts of violence it found. Furthermore, it also recorded information on 11 measures of context (graphicness, explicitness, degree of punishment, etc.) for *each* of the scenes in which violence was found.

Some producers argue that their violence is actually positive or helpful in some way. For example, Disney president Michael Eisner said that violence does have an impact, but a positive one—"a release of tension" (Bayles, 1993). Bob Shaye, CEO of New Line Cinema, distributor of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* horror films, says, "The tales are useful and cautionary. They suggest that evil and harm are everywhere and that we need to be prepared" (Krasny, 1993). Sam Hamm, a writer for *Batman* and *Batman Returns,* argues, "I can remember being scared as a kid at horror films and developing a craving for that sort of thing, but that's what may form imagination in a strong way and that's what creates narrative and inner life. It teaches you to look for stuff that's not safe in the art you enjoy later on." Hamm then moderates his position by adding, "I'm not arguing to expose kids to *Friday the 13th* movies or porno, but I feel there's too much caution about what kids see. Gravitating toward the forbidden is a natural part of growing up" (Krasny, 1993).

Some people deny they have any responsibility for the products they produce. One producer of violent video games told the *Los Angeles Times,* "We make the games we like to play and throw them out into the world. We don't get involved in politics" (Kellner, 1999). Some producers even claim that the games are therapeutic by offering a safe release of anger. "Video games take the place of that [violence and daring] and offer up some of the same images, often in a safer way. They take place inside the house, and people can play them without coming in contact with each other physically" (Kent, 1997, p. C1).

Perhaps the most egregious example of denial of responsibility comes from Wes Craven, director of horror movies such as *Scream* and *Nightmare on Elm Street.* Following the Columbine shootings, Craven and certain other filmmakers were strongly criticized for their ultraviolent plots and graphic images. Craven said that prior to the criticism he had decided to cut down on the amount of blood in his newest film, "but when Congress started citing

Scream as an example of the kind of horrible, reprehensible films out there, we decided not to hold back" ("*Scream 3* Director," 1999). As a backlash against the criticism, he decided to make his film even more graphic.

There is certainly a wide variety of types of denial, but the most convoluted type has to be that expressed by Martin Franks, a senior vice president at CBS, who said he'd read somewhere that television had been blamed for 10,000 murders. Franks said television violence isn't responsible for 10,000 homicides, "but even if we're responsible for one, we have to be careful, and I think we are" (Sullivan, 1998, p. B1).

Shifting Blame

Another popular strategy is to shift the blame onto something else. Three targets are especially popular: guns, parents, and other media. Although each of these deserves its share of blame, notice that none of these industry insiders is talking about *sharing* the blame. Instead, they are arguing for *shifting* the blame away from their industry or shows.

Shifting Blame to Guns. Producer Dick Wolf of the TV show *Law & Order* believes that "we're dealing with the outright hypocrisy of Washington, where many people are calling for steps against television. What about the guns out there? That's the real issue" (Oldenburg & Snider, 1999, p. 1D). Others who shift the blame to guns are Time Warner Chairman Gerald Levin, in a speech before the Hollywood Radio and Television Society (Harrison, 1999); Bob Guccione, now editor and publisher of *Gear* and *Penthouse* magazines (Oldenburg & Snider, 1999); and Fox's George Vradenburg in an interview on *Frontline* (Brennan, 1995).

Some producers argue that although the media in all countries present violence, the murder rate is highest in America because of the easy availability of guns. Producer Henry Winkler said,

> The truth is that wherever you go in Europe, there are American films and TV shows that are just as popular as at home. And you don't have that sense of violence in any other place other than America. . . . They don't have guns. So they don't have kids going through schools on [a] terrible rampage. (Harrison, 1999, p. F1)

Jann Wenner, editor and publisher of *Rolling Stone* magazine, puts his view succinctly: "The reason is easy: It's the guns, stupid." (Harrison, 1999, p. F1). However, the issue of violence in society is not that simple. Guns are a partial reason, but there are others. For years Hollywood has pointed to Japan as an example of a country with a great deal of violence in their media that at the same time maintains a low crime rate because of a strict ban on all guns. However, violence has been escalating in Japan. Recently in a Japanese public school, a man went on a rampage and killed 8 first and second graders and injured 15 other people. His weapon was a kitchen knife, not a gun. Even though Japan still has a strict ban on guns, their crime rate (especially crimes of murder, rape, and arson) has increased 95% in the decade of the 1990s (Reitman, 2001).

Shifting Blame to Parents. Many television writers and programming executives argue that parents should monitor what their children watch. This shifting of blame to parents has been around for a long time. Over 40 years ago, actress Bette Davis argued that parents should be responsible for protecting their children, saying, "Many people are upset by what crime shows do to children. As a professional, I think it's mainly a home responsibility."

This defense flares up when the industry is criticized following a high-profile violent event. Ted Harbert, former ABC Entertainment chief and now an executive at DreamWorks SKG, said, "I don't really agree that you can blame TV or movies in any way for these incidents. I look inward and say, 'Is there anything I'm doing to contribute to this?'" He added, "To me all roads lead back to the parents. Healthy kids can handle violent movies and television. Unhealthy kids can't" (Harrison, 1999, p. F1).

Several weeks after the Littleton shootings in 1999, Jack Valenti shifted blame away from the media by saying that it is up to parents, teachers, and the church to build an "impenetrable moral shield" to protect children. Absent that "moral shield," Valenti said, "no abolition of constitutional rights, no executive order, no congressional law will ever salvage a child's conduct or locate a missing moral core" (Stern, 1999b). This is rather like a factory polluting an area, then blaming the people who get sick for not having an "impenetrable" immune system.

Other Media. Interestingly, many people who defend the content in their own medium are quick to criticize the violence in other media. For example,

Jack Valenti said, "Nobody is looking at the Internet. I don't know of any movies that go into specifics on how to make a pipe bomb. But you can learn that on the Internet" (Wallace & Fiore, 1999, p. B1).

Video games are a popular target of blame. TV producer Robert Singer blames video games, noting that video games put a weapon in the player's hands and give the player points for killing people. Movie producer Sean Daniel (*The Mummy* and *The Jackal*) said he feels the video game industry "is marketing violent materials to youths in America." He argues, "I believe that the video game industry, which has gone completely unregulated, is clearly coming in for its well-deserved attention" (Puig, 1999, p. 1D). Screenwriter Stephen Sommers (*The Mummy*) agreed: "I passed by a video arcade the other day and saw pure violence. They were kicking each other's heads off, and blood was spewing. I would rather my 4-year-old daughter watch most R-rated movies than go to a video arcade" (Puig, 1999, p. 1D).

People in the video game industry shift the blame back onto television. Mike Wilson, CEO of game publisher Gathering of Developers, which distributes *Doom,* says the evening news delivers more violence and more realism than computer games do. "If some network would come out with a show called The Good News, that would be a start. People would watch it. Companies would buy ads, and it would be 'follow the leader'" (Harrison, 1999, p. F1).

Sometimes certain people working within an industry will shift blame from themselves to others working in that same industry. For example, screenwriter Steven De Souza (*Die Hard* and *Die Hard 2*) said, "Every picture I have done has come out more violent than what I wrote." He continued, "I have sat at the screening of one of my movies and been stunned at the level of mayhem that somebody put on the screen" (Puig, 1999, p. 1D). Also, Larry Gelbart, former coproducer of *M*A*S*H,* said, "If there is too much sex and violence on television, the reason that it is so is that the networks want it so. Writers and others are excluded totally from participation in the decision making process. . . . They want it [violence] because they think they can attract viewers. They attract sponsors, and the affiliate stations welcome it" (Cooper, 1996, p. 87).

Defensive Actions

After the shootings in Littleton, Colorado, the media—especially the video game, movie, and television industries—were strongly criticized as contributing to the conditions that led to such a horrible event. People in the

industry understandably became very defensive. Their behaviors in that time of stress are revealing. While so much attention was focused on them, they had an opportunity to make some meaningful changes in their content and thus show the public their sincerity in doing their part in making the situation better. What did they do? Their reactions were primarily of one of three types: changing titles of movies, changing release dates, and changing how they promoted their shows. Notice that all of these changes illustrate two things. First, the producers were aware of the public's criticism that their products have too much violence, so they realized they had to do something or risk further criticism. Second, these defensive changes were trivial; none were substantive.

Changing Titles. Following the Columbine High School shootings, some producers examined the names of their ready-to-be-released movies and decided to change their names. For example, Miramax was planning to release a movie named *Killing Mrs. Tingle,* a dark teen comedy about a student's plot to get revenge on her teacher for a bad grade. But after a teacher was killed in Littleton, the studio renamed it *Teaching Mrs. Tingle.* The plot stayed the same—only the name was changed (Stern, 1999a). Wendy Finerman (producer of *Forrest Gump*) changed the title of *Sugar and Spice and Semiautomatics* to simply *Sugar and Spice.* In this film a high school cheerleader becomes pregnant with the star quarterback's child and turns to crime to support herself (Masters, McDowell, & Ressner, 1999).

Changing Release Dates. Another "change" was rescheduling the release of a movie or repositioning a TV program. For example, the release date for *Fight Club,* a bare-knuckle-boxing drama starring Brad Pitt, was pushed back several months from the initially planned release date of August 6 (Masters et al., 1999). Also, Sony moved back the release of *Arlington Road* from May 14 to well into summer. Starring Jeff Bridges and Tim Robbins, this is a paranoia-fueled tale of a man who thinks his next-door neighbors are terrorists (Masters et al., 1999).

As for television, the WB network rescheduled two episodes of its hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* one featuring a kid bringing a gun to school and the season finale showing kids carrying medieval weapons under their graduation gowns. *Buffy* creator Josh Whedon said it was an "ugly coincidence" that the Littleton shootings occurred shortly before the scheduled air dates of the two episodes. Whedon said he did not feel the finale needed to be preempted, but

if there had been a single act of violence at a high school graduation, "How horrible would we feel?" Whedon asked (Stern & Petrikin, 1999).

Promoting the Violence Less. Some movie marketing departments toned down their advertising, keeping guns out of the artwork and playing down violence. "We're thinking about it up front at the sketch stage, long before we execute," says Tony Seiniger, whose Beverly Hills ad firm does work for several top studios. He said his clients were thinking about whether actors who are popular with kids should pose with weapons. "Everybody's aware that there's a definite responsibility, the same way we don't have people smoking in ads anymore" (Masters et al., 1999). The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), which runs the industry's voluntary rating system, already bans ads in which guns are pointed at heads, and its president, Jack Valenti, says the standards may get tougher (Masters et al., 1999). Of course, these standards apply only to the promos, not to the content of the movies themselves. For example, when Miramax renamed *Killing Mrs. Tingle* to *Teaching Mrs. Tingle,* it also toned back its promotion of the film to depict it as more of a lighthearted kidnapping-and-physical-abuse caper (Stern, 1999a).

Changing titles, rescheduling release dates, and toning down the violence in the advertising for movies all show that producers are sensitive to the issue of social responsibility. But none of these changes deals with the substance of the problem. To the contrary, these so-called changes serve only to mask the existence of media violence while allowing it to continue as a problem. In fact, industry executives see these responses to tragedies as temporary. "If someone passes away in your family, there are certain things you don't say in the week following the death that you might say three months later," UPN CEO Dean Valentine says (Stern & Petrikin, 1999, p. 1).

No matter what happens or how much the industry is criticized, the majority of people in the industry continue with business as usual. There was a strong outcry in the early 1990s about the violence in children's programs, recalls Kathryn Montgomery, president of the Washington-based Center for Media Education. "But in the middle of all that—and the posturing by industry—what you see coming on children's TV is a proliferation of all these action-based programs." Action shows that popped up in 1994, she says, include *Battletech* and *Creepy Crawlers* (both of them by Saban Entertainment); *Gladiators 2000; Ironman; Mutant League; Monster Force; Skeleton Warriors; Super Human Samurai Syber Squad;* and *Tattooed Teenage Alien Fighters From Beverly Hills* (Clayton, 1994, p. 1).

Also, it is business as usual at the *Jerry Springer Show,* although in April 1998, the producers announced they would eliminate all physical violence from the talk show as a positive reaction to well-publicized protests against lewd language and violent outbreaks on the show. But this policy lasted only a few weeks before the show's syndicator pressured the producers to put violence back in, so the brawling resumed (Mifflin, 1998).

POLICYMAKERS

For almost half a century, policymakers have been concerned about the prevalence of violence in the media and its potential effect on the population. The U.S. Congress began holding hearings in the early 1950s, and they have continued holding hearings up to this day (see Table 1.3).

These hearings have been characterized by testimony from a wide variety of people, including social critics, social scientists, movie studio heads, television network programmers, First Amendment lawyers, physicians, parents, and so forth. Although in our democracy it is desirable to ensure that a wide range of voices is heard on important issues, many people expect Congress to do more than simply create forums for debate. Congress must make laws to protect liberty and promote the general welfare of the population, so Congress must sort through all the voices expressed in their forums, decide which are more credible, assess the threats to the population, and then take action in order to reduce the threats. To date, Congress has had little success in this task. For all the effort that has gone into 28 hearings, very little has come out. In the early 1970s, Congress set aside $1 million for new empirical research to increase the knowledge base. In the mid-1970s, the FCC pressured the industry to create Family Viewing Hour, but very quickly other people in the industry took the policy to court and got it rescinded. Then, in the early 1990s, Congress passed the Telecommunications Act, which brought about the V-chip. The V-chip is now part of all television sets sold in the United States, but this is far from moving us closer to a solution to the problem of media violence (see Myth 9).

RESEARCHERS

People in the media research community have been working on this complex problem for most of the 20th century. It wasn't until the 1970s that the

(Text continues on page 26)

Table 1.3 History of Federal Lawmakers Considering the Problem of Media Violence

1952	Congress got involved in the issue in May 1952 when the House Subcommittee on the Federal Communications Commission held hearings to look into television content to determine if programs contained immoral or offensive material. Immoral material was defined as that which places an improper emphasis on crime, violence, and corruption. Chaired by Oren Harris (D-AR), the Subcommittee held hearings for 13 days over a six-month period, taking testimony from broadcast spokespeople and critics.
1954	The Senate Judiciary Committee created a special Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency, which was concerned with the negative influence of television, movies, and comic books. The hearings were held in June and October of 1954 under the chairmanship of Robert C. Hendrickson (R-NJ); these hearings were devoted primarily to industry professionals and executives.
1955	The Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency held a second round of hearings under the leadership of Estes Kefauver (D-TN). These hearings focused on the issue of determining the long-term effects of television on the country's youth. These hearings took testimony from social scientists who had conducted effects studies.
1961-1962	The Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency held a third round of hearings under the leadership of Thomas Dodd (D-CT). The hearings began in June 1961 and went until May 1962, during which time many researchers and industry executives testified.
1964	The Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency held hearings in July and reported that a relationship had been conclusively established between televised crime and violence and antisocial attitudes and behavior among juvenile viewers. However, the subcommittee did not believe that television was either the sole or most significant cause of juvenile delinquency.
1968	Five days after Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, President Lyndon Johnson appointed the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence with Milton Eisenhower as chair. Because the commission was appointed for only about seven months (to the

Table 1.3 Continued

	end of Johnson's term), it relied on existing research and sought testimony from leading experts. The Commission produced a report that did not include any recommendations for legislation, instead saying that there is no single explanation of violences's causes and no single prescription for its control. The report essentially warned the industry to be more careful in its portrayals of violence and warned parents to be more careful in monitoring the viewing habits of their children.
1969	The Senate Subcommittee on Communications, under the leadership of John Pastore (D-RI), held hearings off and on for two years; $1.5 million was allocated to social scientists to fund original research into the effects of television violence on children's and teenagers' attitudes and behaviors.
1969	The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior was created. The Committee commissioned social scientists to conduct original research into the effects of television violence on children's and teenagers' attitudes and behaviors.
1971	The Senate Judiciary Committee's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency commissioned Surgeon General William Stewart and his committee to investigate the effects of televised violence. A budget of $1 million was provided for research and another $500,000 to $800,000 for administrative expenses to produce new research.
1972	The Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behavior released a five-volume report, and the Senate held 15 days of hearings on the report. The report concluded that there was a great deal of violence on television and that people were spending more and more time watching this content. Also, they found that viewing violence increases the likelihood that viewers will behave aggressively given certain conditions. However, these conclusions were heavily qualified, and the negative conclusions were largely ignored.
1974	Another hearing was held in the House of Representatives to affirm the credibility of the Surgeon General's Report. House members were willing to broaden the report's implications to realms of obscenity and children's programming and advertising.

(Continued)

Table 1.3 Continued

1975	The death of MacDonald led to the appointment of a new chairperson, Lionel Van Deerlin (CA). The subcommittees had to deal with various Hollywood production communities that had filed lawsuits against the family viewing hour unit.
1975	The chairman of the FCC, Richard Wiley, negotiated an agreement with the broadcast industry in which broadcasters agreed to limit the number of programs that contained violent behavior. The television industry also agreed to restrict its programming during the prime-time hour of 8 to 9 p.m. and also for an additional non-prime-time hour from 7 to 8 p.m. Television broadcasters agreed to add a Family Viewing Hour amendment to the Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters. It reserved the prime-time hour of 8 to 9 p.m. for programming that would be suitable for a general family audience. It left the considerable interpretation of what would constitute "inappropriate programming" to the individual television networks.
1975	The Writers Guild of America filed a lawsuit against the FCC and the networks arguing that the Family Viewing Hour was an infringement of their First Amendment rights.
1976	Two Congressmen (Van Deerlin and Waxman) held two days of hearings in their districts in Southern California to give people among them in television production a chance to air their grievances. Norman Lear, Grant Tinker, Gene Roddenberry, and Larry Gelbart testified in opposition to the Family Viewing Hour.
1976	In November, a federal judge ruled that the Family Viewing Hour must be rescinded.
1976	The House Subcommittee on Communications, under the chairmanship of Lionel Van Deerlin, held hearings on both sex and violence on television.
1977	In March, the Van Deerlin subcommittee held its last hearing on sex and violence. The subcommittee concluded that the level of violence on television continues to be a cause for serious concern and that responsibility for the level of violence rests largely with the television networks. However, they concluded that: (a) industry self-regulation is a potentially effective way to limit the level of televised violence, and (b) parental supervision is probably the most effective way to curb negative effects of excessive viewing of televised violence by children.

Table 1.3 Continued

1982	The National Institute of Mental Health funded social scientists to synthesize the fast-growing body of research on the effects of television, based on the rationale that 90% of all research focusing on television's influence on behavior appeared in the decade following the Surgeon General's Report in 1972. The 1982 report, titled *Television and Behavior: Ten Years of Scientific Progress and Implications for the Eighties,* is composed of 30 chapters synthesizing the existing research.
1983	In March the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications, Consumer Protection, and Finance held hearings on children and television.
1983	In April, the House Subcommittee on Crime held hearings on crime and violence in the media.
1984	The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Crime held hearings on media violence under the chairmanship of Arlen Spector (R-PA).
1986	In June, the Senate Committee on the Judiciary held hearings on TV violence antitrust exemption under the chairmanship of Strom Thurmond (R-SC).
1988-1995	Five congressional hearings (two chaired by Sen. Paul Simon [D-IL]) were held, and 88 expert witnesses testified. During this period, nine new bills were introduced to limit violence on television.
1990	Congress passed the Children's Television Act, which gave the broadcast and cable industry a three-year exemption from the antitrust laws so they could voluntarily cooperate in establishing standards to limit the showing of violence. This Act also asked local stations to file a list of their educational programming for children with the FCC each year.
1993	Both houses of Congress passed resolutions denouncing programming containing violence (H. Res. 202, S. Res. 122). These were part of a tide of bills intended to curb violence on television, cable, and radio ("Summary of bills," 1993).
1993	Companion bills sponsored by Rep. John Bryant (D-TX) and Sen. Dave Durenberger (R-MN) were introduced. These bills required the FCC to establish standards to reduce the amount of violent programming on broadcast television, cable, and radio. A station that violated the standards would be subject to a $5,000 fine. Intentional violations could bring as much as a $25,000 fine, and repeated violations could lead to a revocation of license. Under both bills, the

(Continued)

Table 1.3 Continued

	FCC could exempt "as public interest requires news broadcasts, sporting events, educational programming, and documentaries" (H.R. 2837, S. 943).
1993	In the House, Charles Schumer (D-NY) introduced legislation to establish a presidential commission on television violence that would include the surgeon general, the attorney general, and 26 others appointed by the president. The commission would seek opinions of children, parents, and experts and make recommendations to the president and Congress.
1993	In July, Rep. Joseph Kennedy (D-MA) introduced the "Parents Television Empowerment Act," which required the FCC to set up a toll-free telephone number for complaints about violence on broadcast and cable television. The FCC would publish quarterly reports naming the 50 programs with the highest number of complaints.
1993	Senators Ernest Hollings (D-SC) and Daniel Inouye (D-HI) introduced the Children's Television Violence Protection Act, which prohibited the airing of violent content (as defined by the FCC) during hours when children are reasonably likely to comprise a substantial portion of the audience. It also required stations to provide advisory messages before violent programs.
1993	The Television Violence Report Card Act was introduced in the House by Rep. Richard Durbin (D-IL) and in the Senate by Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND). It required the FCC to rate television programs on the amount of violence they contain and to publish the ratings quarterly. The law also required the FCC to identify program sponsors who supported the most violent shows.
1993	In October, Attorney General Janet Reno said that "regulation of [entertainment] violence is constitutionally permissible" (U.S. News & World Report Online, 1994, p. 44).
1993-1994	Bills were introduced in the House by Rep. Edward Markey (D-MA) and in the Senate by Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-ND) that required new television sets to have circuitry, known as the "V-chip," to allow viewers to block programs that have been rated violent by broadcasters and cable networks.
1994	In October, the FCC backed off from its proposed regulation pushing the broadcasting industry to clean up its act on violence. Instead, FCC Chairman Reed Hundt emphasized the importance of self-regulation

Table 1.3 Continued

	by the television broadcasting industry as a means to curb television violence. Hundt said he did not want the FCC to play the role of censor.
1995	FCC Chairman Reed Hundt said that the precedent held by the courts in regulating sexual material provided a foundation for regulating violent material. He said that the government has the constitutional right to enact a curb on violent programming.
1995	Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) introduced legislation to require ratings of television shows on a quarterly basis. The Department of Commerce would award grants to a nonprofit entity such as a university to do the ratings. The ratings would serve as a report card on violence.
1995	In July, President Bill Clinton endorsed congressional proposals to require television makers to install a computer chip that could automatically screen out programs rated as violent.
1995	In August, the House of Representatives approved by a 305 to 117 vote a bill that radically rewrote the nation's communications laws for first time since 1934. The main provisions of the bill deregulated broadcasting, cable, and telephone companies, but the bill also required that the V-chip be installed in television sets.
1996	In January, the landmark Telecommunications Competition and Deregulation Act of 1996 became law. The V-chip provision said that television sets sold in the United States after 1998 had to include the V-chip technology. In the meantime, the television networks were asked to develop their own ratings system that could be used with the V-chip.
1996	In February, the TV industry agreed to create a voluntary television ratings system by the end of the year to warn viewers about programs with sex and violence.
1996	President Clinton summoned entertainment industry executives to the White House and received an industry pledge to produce a voluntary television ratings system by January 1997.
1996	In June, President Clinton announced that television executives had agreed to air three hours of educational programs a week for children.
1999	In August, President Clinton introduced three public service announcements urging parents to talk with their children about television violence.

research base grew large enough for many social scientists to begin taking their expectations seriously that some negative behaviors could be attributed to exposure to violent portrayals in the media. Up until that time, skepticism about the influence of the media was widespread, but it gradually eroded as the research base grew, until now there are only a very few researchers who doubt that exposure to media violence has negative effects.

The formal, systematic study of exposure to the mass media, especially violent content, and its potential effects began in earnest in the late 1920s with the Payne Studies, a set of 13 studies designed to assess the influence of the newest mass medium—movies—on children (Lowry & DeFleur, 1995).

The research built slowly at first until the late 1960s, after a decade of assassinations (John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King), dramatic rises in crime, and general civil unrest (protests against American involvement in the Vietnam War). At this time, the U.S. Surgeon General assembled a task force to generate more research and thus create a sound basis to inform governmental policy on this issue.

As the research base grew, skepticism about media influence waned, especially among those scholars most directly involved with conducting research on this topic. Several of the more prominent of these effects researchers were appointed to the first major research commission on this topic—the 1970 Surgeon General's Task Force on Media Violence. The Task Force was controlled primarily by people from the media industries, so the warning voices of the researchers were smothered in the 1972 report issued by the Task Force. People in the media industries felt that the researchers on the Task Force were premature with their pronouncements, because they felt the research base was too small and contained studies with flaws in their designs. However, as these media scholars continued with their research and as that research influenced other scholars to study the topic of media violence, the set of findings grew more extensive. The size of this research base is now somewhere around 300 carefully designed and executed empirical studies that have undergone rigorous peer review and have been published in the most respected scholarly journals. In addition to this core of highest-quality research studies, there is another set of publications—numbering up to 3,000—in which other scholars have reviewed those findings, synthesized new insights, or promulgated the central conclusion: Exposure to violence in the media increases risks of harmful effects.

Over the past two decades, virtually everyone who carefully reads the body of research on this topic has become convinced that exposure to media violence

increases the probability of negative effects such as fear, desensitization, and even the behavioral effect of disinhibition. A "disinhibition effect" is the lowering of a person's natural inhibitions against performing in an aggressive manner. The body of research clearly shows that when people are exposed to violent portrayals in the media, they are more likely to behave in an aggressive manner when given an opportunity immediately following the exposure (Andison, 1977; Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, & Miller, 1990; Comstock, 1985; Comstock & Strasburger, 1990; Friedrich-Cofer & Huston, 1986; Geen, 1994; Hearold, 1986; Heath, Bresolin, & Rinaldi, 1989; National Institute of Mental Health, 1982; Paik & Comstock, 1994; Roberts & Maccoby, 1985; Rule & Ferguson, 1986; Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991). Also, people in the medical community have joined together to issue strong statements (see Table 1.1). For example, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychological Association, and the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry issued a statement that said, "The effects of violent media are measurable and long lasting. Moreover, prolonged viewing of media violence can lead to emotional desensitization toward violence in real life" (Albiniak, 2000, p. 14). The belief in a connection between exposure to media violence and negative effects now seems intuitively obvious, akin to other beliefs that seem intuitively obvious to us, such that criticism of the belief seems unreasonable.

Resistance From Some Researchers

Several decades ago, when there was not much of a research base for making claims about the effects of media violence, it was reasonable to doubt the claim that portrayals of media violence led to harmful effects to individuals and to society. Many media effects researchers were skeptical about the claim that exposure to violence could be harmful (Howitt & Cumberbatch, 1975; Jones, 1971; Kaplan & Singer, 1976; Kniveton, 1976; Lesser, 1977; Singer, 1971). At the time, the field of media research was going through a transitional phase because scholars were disappointed about not finding the powerful effects they had expected to find. As a backlash, many scholars took the position that the influence of the media was weak at best. Then in the 1960s, researchers began looking for more modest effects rather than the one "big powerful effect" of the media. Researchers designed studies to examine the influence of various kinds of content on different kinds of people, especially on children, people living in high-crime neighborhoods, and people with

high trait aggressiveness. This line of research was generally successful in showing that different people were affected in different ways by exposure to media violence.

Although acceptance of the research evidence is not unanimous, the number of people who continue to believe there is no link between exposure to media violence and negative effects has dwindled to a very few. For example, during the 1980s, Jonathan Freedman continued to publish several critiques of the existing social science research (Freedman, 1984, 1986). Today, the lone dissenting voice in the research community is Jib Fowles, who recently published a book titled *The Case for Television Violence* (1999).

Criticism and debate are usually signs of a healthy research community. People who challenge the conventional interpretations of research findings are essential to the growth of knowledge. But in order for criticism and challenges to be useful, they need to be based on an informed analysis that challenges researchers with criticism that gives researchers deeper insights into their shortcomings so that they can be overcome. Fowles's (1999) criticism is based on the same point that was used more than 40 years ago, that the individual research studies exhibit flaws. To be fair to Fowles, he is right that there are flaws in the body of research. However, there are no research studies that are completely free of flaws. No one has ever designed and executed the perfect research study. Furthermore, perfection, although a worthy goal, can never be fully achieved. This is why science is progressive—new studies improve on past studies and thereby knowledge grows. Researchers are constantly trying to improve past studies by using better samples, better measures, better stimulus materials, better procedures, and better analyses. It has always been this way, and it always will be. There is no end point to knowledge; we can always construct better ways to explain our world.

Given this progressive process in the generation of knowledge, the question becomes: Are we far enough down this research path to see patterns in the research findings that consistently show up in study after study? The answer is yes. The question then shifts to: Can we have confidence that the findings of these research studies reflect the reality of media influence, or are the findings anomalies that have been generated by flaws in the research studies? Fowles (1999) believes that the findings are anomalies and dismisses all the research. However, other scholars think through this body of research more carefully. They notice that although flaws vary across studies, the findings of negative influence still consistently emerge. Because the findings are consistent across studies, each of which has a different set of flaws, the findings

appear so robust that they are stronger than the flaws and therefore cannot be ignored. In fact, the flaws in the individual research studies serve less to support the argument that the findings are faulty and more to support the argument for the robustness of the findings. Fowles misses this point. To use an analogy, it is as if Fowles is arguing that because no automobile is without flaws (poor gas mileage, bad safety record, overpriced, etc.), automobiles are therefore not a useful form of transportation. In this analogy, the flaws do not wipe out the usefulness of automobiles as a form of transportation; automobiles can still be improved in many ways, and there are many cars in junkyards, but none of this prevents us from regarding automobiles as a viable form of transportation. With media violence, each study has its flaws, but the body of research is very useful in helping us understand how media violence influences us in different ways. Of course people are not automobiles. But even though people are far more complicated than automobiles, the point illustrated by the analogy still holds—that is, each research study contributes to knowledge is some way, however minutely, and there comes a time when the accumulation of research reaches a point where we can no longer say we know nothing about a topic. We have long since passed that point with media violence.

Misinformation

There is misinformation in the research community. The most visible bit of misinformation is the claim that the research base is 3,000 publications. Actually, there are 300 empirical studies; the remaining publications are articles that promulgate the empirical findings. However, a research base of 300 studies is still quite large. The studies within that research base are also quite consistent. The 3,000 number is an exaggeration, and this is unfortunate because it gives critics some ammunition. But the conclusion that exposure to media violence leads to negative effects is not invalidated by the exaggeration. There is still a relatively large and strong research basis.

A more serious problem with the research base is that it is not more broad. That is, it is essentially limited to three negative effects—disinhibition, fear, and desensitization. If you look at the entire research base, about 70% of the studies confirm a disinhibition effect, 10% a fear effect, 10% a desensitization effect, and the remaining 10% suggest a variety of other negative effects.

Another problem with the research is that although it is strong in pointing out that there is a problem, it is less strong in helping craft a solution. Researchers have identified risk factors that increase the probability that a

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.