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.

MYTH 5

Violence in the media reflects violence in society.

In the film *Money Train,* a criminal attempts to rob a subway token seller. The criminal sprays lighter fluid into the token seller's glass-enclosed booth, then throws in a lit match. The makers of the film claimed they were depicting a real crime method. When someone copied the action depicted on film, the movie makers deflected criticism by arguing that the copying of the fictional crime validated their claim that the movie was only reflecting real life (Leland, 1995).

It is common for producers to argue that violence is a part of everyday life and that the media are only reflecting the violence. This has been an argument used by people in the industry for a long time. For example, three decades ago, Baldwin and Lewis (1972) interviewed the producers of the top 18 series on prime-time network television at the time and found producers who held the opinion that it would be fantasy to act as if violence did not exist.

There is a kernel of truth in the argument that violence in the media reflects society. Violence has existed for much longer than any of the media, so the media cannot be blamed for creating the concept of violence. However, the key word in the myth is *reflects.* Are the media merely holding a mirror up to something in the real world? Or are the media distorting and amplifying the violence from the real world? In this chapter, I will show that if the media are

holding a mirror up to the real world, it is a fun-house mirror that reflects back a greatly distorted picture. For this reason, the claim that the media are merely reflecting violence in society is a myth. There are four arguments that show the faulty nature of this belief. These arguments concern distortions in frequency, type of violence, characters involved in violence, and context.

FREQUENCY IS AMPLIFIED

The key to understanding the frequency argument is to find out how much violence there is in the media and then compare that to some real-world figure. This is not as easy to do as it might seem. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to get a good frequency figure for either the media or the real world. However, let's use what we do know to construct some good estimates.

The best information we have for the frequency of violence in the media is limited to television programming, where many careful content analyses have been conducted. We don't have good frequency figures about violence in films, books, magazines, newspapers, video games, or the lyrics of popular music. So let's use only the figures from television, realizing that our numbers will be a severe underestimation of the total number of violent depictions in all media. The NTVS found about 18,000 acts of violence in each of its three composite weeks of programming. That is about 936,000 acts per year. The analyses conducted by NTVS were limited to only 23 channels and only 17 hours per day. If we extrapolated out to 24 hours per day and 50 channels (the number received by most television households), we arrive at about 2.6 million violent acts. Extrapolating beyond the limits of the NTVS sample (which excluded news, documentaries, and sports), it is reasonable to estimate that the average household has access to about 3 million acts of violence per year from the single medium of television.

How do we find the real-world figure for violence? There is no way to count all acts, but perhaps we can derive a good estimate from national crime figures. In 1999, there were about 11.6 million criminal offenses (Federal Bureau of Investigation [FBI], 2001b), but about 88% of these were property crimes where the victim was not present; only 12%, or about 1.4 million, were violent crimes, which include murders, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault (U.S. Department of Justice, 1999).

Thus if people were able to watch all television programs provided by their cable TV company in a given year, they would view 3 million acts of violence. If at the same time, they were able to witness all violent crime during that year, they would see 1.4 million acts. Granted, this is not a perfect comparison, but the media number is so much greater than the real-world number that it is clear that the media present far more violence per year than occurs in real life. If the comparison is inaccurate, it is likely to err on the side of placing the numbers too close together. Recall that the NTVS used a fairly narrow definition of violence that focused on physical force intended to hurt other people. This definition did not include idle threats of violence, nor did it include verbal violence. So most of the acts recorded by NTVS are likely to be criminal. Also, if the violence in video games, films, books, magazines, and newspapers were included, the 3 million figure would be much larger.

Let's take our comparison one step further. To this point, the comparison has been between total occurrences of violence. No person could ever witness all the occurrences. With television, the average person views about 23 hours of television per week (Nielsen, 1998). That would mean that the typical viewer will see about 6,700 acts of violence on television per year. How likely is a person to witness an act of violence in real life? Again this is impossible to determine with accuracy, but it is safe to conclude that the number is much smaller than 6,700. There are about 1.4 million violent crimes each year. Let's assume that each violent crime has one perpetrator, one victim, and two bystanders. That would mean about 5.6 million people were involved in some way in a violent crime in their real lives last year—assuming no one witnessed more than one crime. That would put the probability of seeing a real-world crime at 1 chance in 49. Another way to say this is: On average, a person is likely to witness one violent crime in his or her real life every 49 years. During that same 49-year period, the average person is likely to witness about 328,000 acts of violence on television.

To make matters worse, these calculations are likely to be an *under*estimation of the degree of distortion for two reasons. First, the calculations are limited to exposure to violence in only one medium—television. Add to this all the violent messages a person is exposed to in films, newspapers, magazines, video games, radio, CDs, and the Internet. Second, the amount of violence in the media is growing, especially in nonentertainment programming such as news programs. A recent report released by the Maynard Institute for Journalism Education in Oakland, California, stated that while homicide rates

dropped 33% in this country from 1990 to 1998, homicide news coverage on network television increased 473% (Texeira, 2001, p. B3). So news shows, which are purportedly reality programming, are not only portraying a very unrealistic pattern concerning crime, but they are moving more and more in the direction of distortion. Dori Maynard, author of the research report, said she does not believe the press sets out to distort reality, but they do so anyway. "I don't say they are ill meaning; they just don't see it" (Texeira, 2001, p. B3). Clearly the media are not simply reflecting the violence in the real world— they are *greatly* amplifying it.

PROFILE OF THE TYPE OF VIOLENCE IS UNREALISTIC

We can move beyond the comparison of frequencies and look at the type of violence. Again, the available figures on media violence are limited to television.

If the television world in its fictional narratives and news programs replicates the real world, then we should expect to find that most of the crime is not violent, but again this is not the case. The smallest percentage of aggression should be at the most serious end of the spectrum—that is, physical acts that result in great harm should account for a small percentage of all aggressive acts. For example, the FBI Uniform Crime Report statistics typically indicate that of all crimes, murder was 0.1%; rape, 0.8%; robbery, 3.5% (and only 1.1% were robberies with injuries); and aggravated assault, 7.9%. Most of the crime is property crime, which includes burglary (18.0%) and larceny-theft (59.8%) (FBI, 2001b).

Clearly, in the real world only a small percentage (about 12.3%, or about one act out of eight) of crime is violent. But this is not what the nonfiction shows on television tell us. A few years ago, I conducted an analysis of the content in a composite week of nonfiction (primarily newscasts) television along with some of my students at Indiana University (Potter et al., 1997). The findings of that study were startling. When we limited our focus to criminal aggression only, we found much higher rates of serious violence on news and "reality" programming than in the real world. In this study, we began with a base of 832 criminal acts (those in the assault, attack on property, and theft categories). Of these, 541 (65.0%) depicted serious violence (assaults resulting in death or great harm, bombings, and arson). In the real world, only 18.5% of

all crimes were violent in 1995. Also, in the real world at that time, assaults accounted for only about 15% of all crimes, whereas thefts of all kinds accounted for about 77% of all criminal behaviors. However, in our analyses of television, we found that thefts accounted for only 3% of all criminal behavior. Similar findings also appear in the work of other analyses of television content. For example, Oliver (1994) examined the content of "reality programs" and found that 87% of criminal suspects on those television shows were associated with violent crimes.

Ironically, fictional programs on television treat violence more realistically than do so-called reality and news programs. When analyzing violence only in fictional programs, almost one third of all physical aggression is violent, whereas in television's "reality" programming almost two thirds of all crimes are presented as being violent. This is not to say that the fictional world on television treats violence in a realistic manner; it does not. Violence is overrepresented in fictional programs compared with the real world, but the greatest distortion is in the genres of news and "reality" programming.

DISTORTION IN PORTRAYALS OF CHARACTERS

We can also examine how the people and characters who are involved in violence are portrayed. First, we will look at the gender patterns of the perpetrators and victims. Then we will look at the patterns of ethnicity. Third, we'll examine the portrayal of the relationship between the perpetrators and their victims.

Gender Profile

If the serious forms of aggression are realistic, the perpetrators and victims should be predominantly male. According to national crime statistics, among those arrested for violent crimes, 94% are male. This includes arrests for murder, where 89% are male; with rape, males account for 99%; robbery, 90%; aggravated assault, 80%; larceny and theft, 65% (FBI, 2001b). As for victims, typically 78% of murder victims are male (Maguire, Pastore, & Flanagan, 1993, pp. 390-391).

When we compare the real-world figures with the figures in the world of television, we can see some distortions (see Table 6.1). It is true that males are

Table 6.1　　　　How the Violence Is Portrayed

| | | Television World | |
Characteristic	Real World	Fiction	Nonfiction
Gender: female			
Perpetrator serious assaults	12	17	24
Perpetrator minor assaults	22	27	17
Perpetrator property crime	29	35	31
Victim serious assaults	22	27	51
Victim minor assaults	NA	33	26
Victim property crime	NA	41	53
Ethnicity: African American			
Perpetrator serious assaults	40	14	20
Perpetrator minor assaults	35	16	23
Perpetrator property crime	32	5	23
Victim serious assaults	50	11	24
Victim minor assaults	NA	13	23
Victim property crime	NA	8	6

more likely to be perpetrators and victims of violence compared with females in the television world, but there is still distortion. This distortion is most egregious in news programming, where females are greatly overrepresented as both perpetrators and victims of serious assaults. Again we see a pattern that the fictional portrayals in the television world are more in line with the real-world patterns than are the portrayals in the so-called nonfiction shows.

Ethnic Profile

If the serious forms of aggression are realistic, a high percentage of the perpetrators and victims should be African American. Almost half of those arrested for violent crimes are African American. This includes arrests for murder, where 52% are African American; rape, 37%; robbery, 54%; and aggravated assault, 35% (FBI, 2001b). As for victims, typically 50% of all murder victims are African American (Maguire et al., 1993, pp. 390-391). Only about 11% of the U.S. population is African American, so the real-world figures indicate that the rates of serious assaults are much higher among African Americans than among people of other ethnic backgrounds, but this is not reflected accurately in the television world.

In television entertainment programming, there is a very unrealistic picture of African Americans. For example, in the real world, 49% of those arrested for serious crimes are African American, but in the television world only 14% of all perpetrators of serious assaults are African American. This pattern of underrepresentation of African Americans holds across all categories of perpetrators and victims. This pattern of underrepresentation of African Americans also holds in nonfiction programming. In an interesting related study, Oliver (1994) found that among television police officers, African Americans were underrepresented in the TV world (9%) compared with the real world (17%).

Relationship of Perpetrator to Victim

In the real world, most victims of aggression know the perpetrators. With murder cases, among those in which police knew of the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, one third were family members, about 40% were acquaintances, and only one quarter were strangers (Maguire et al., 1993, pp. 386-387).

Again, the television world provides a distortion. In our analysis of nonfictional television violence, we found that in the television world, the victim knew the perpetrator (close friend or family, self, or acquaintance) in fewer than 16% of serious assaults. With minor assaults, the figure is higher, at 30% (Potter & Vaughan, 1997). These figures are still far from the real-world figure of 75%.

DISTORTION OF CONTEXT AND MEANING

A fourth way to compare the accuracy of the television portrayals of violence with the real world is to look at contextual characteristics. The analysis of realism in this section focuses on two contextual characteristics: harm to victim and consequences to the perpetrators. Let's examine the patterns of these context factors, first in nonfictional programming, then in fictional programming.

Nonfictional Programming

On the issue of portrayal of harm, again the media present a very unrealistic picture. The NTVS (1998) reports that with nonfictional programming,

about 30% of all violent instances are depicted with no harm. Interesting, the authors report that when harm is shown it is usually death. Thus the depiction of harm is either death or no harm at all.

The picture of harm came up as unrealistic in my analyses also. Over half (53%) of antisocial acts are portrayed with no harmful consequences to the victims (Potter et al., 1997). The highest rates of major consequences are with accidents and serious assaults, which is a positive indication that viewers are getting cues that antisocial activity results in harmful consequences. However, the number of antisocial acts shown without any consequences is also very high. So viewers are presented with a mixed message on this point.

There is a very intriguing, albeit complicated, pattern worth exploring in this area. On the surface, it appears that the television world is realistic in its portrayal of punishment. For example, only 23% of aggressive acts are depicted as being punished in news and "reality" programming (Potter et al., 1997). This seems like a very low number until we compare it to some real-world figures and find out that in real life, most serious acts of aggression also go unpunished. For example, in 1991 only 21% of all reported crimes were cleared by an arrest. Arrest rates are higher with violent crimes (44%) than with property crimes (18%), but still, most crimes remain unsolved, much less punished (Maguire et al., 1993, p. 452). So the low rates of punishment displayed in nonfictional programming correspond to real-world lack of punishment.

What makes this finding especially interesting is that the public thinks that the police are doing a good job of solving crimes. For example, 59% of Americans rate the police's record of solving crimes as excellent or very good (Maguire et al., 1993, p. 169). Where does the public get this misperception? In nonfiction television programming, less than one quarter of all antisocial acts are shown with any punishment. This figure climbs to about one third with serious assaults, but still this figure is far below what it should be to explain the public's trust in the efficacy of law enforcement. Again, where is the public getting this misperception? The answer might be from fictional programming.

Another example of a distorted picture of violence is in the way the media cover suicides. A recent report conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania says that the press frequently sensationalizes a suicide, "describing the suicide method in detail, playing up the romantic or heroic elements of a suicide and misrepresenting troubled victims as healthy high-achieving people" (Gupta, 2001, p. A26). The report, which

was endorsed by U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher as well as the National Institute of Mental Health, takes the position that the press does a poor job of informing people that mental illness is implicated in 90% of America's suicides and that a suicide should be treated as a failure in health, not as a dramatic story. Furthermore, the report says that the press also sends the wrong message with the use of terms such as *successful* and *failed* suicides.

Fictional Programming

One of the most distorted aspects of violence in fictional programming is the paucity of depictions of harm—even when the violent acts would be serious or even life threatening in real life. The unrealistic pattern of harm that we saw on nonfictional programming is even more unrealistic in fictional programming. The NTVS (1998) reports that in 43% of all violent acts, there were no depictions of any harm to the victim. The authors of the study report that in 54% of all violent acts, the likely harm to victims would be very serious, such as incapacitating or lethal. When they conducted their analysis of only those acts of violence that should be portrayed with serious harm, still about one third were depicted with no harm whatsoever to the victim.

In my analyses, fewer than one in six acts were shown with major consequences in the fictional world of television (Potter et al., 1995). This is due in large part to the fact that a relatively small percentage of the acts are serious enough to warrant such a portrayal. With most acts falling into the categories of verbal remarks, we should not expect a high percentage of major consequences. So the deviation of the contextual element of consequences from the morality play template does not provide a serious problem. However, the case with the reward contextual variable is quite different.

This pattern of unrealistic harm seems to hold for film also. For example, McArthur et al. (2000) analyzed the top 100 grossing American films of 1994 and found an average of 16 acts of violence per film. Although 80% of the violent actions were executed with a strong enough force to cause harm if done in real life, only 10% of all acts were depicted as showing any consequences to the recipient's body, and fewer than 1% of all acts showed the victim getting medical attention.

Another characteristic of unrealism is the lack of punishment for acts of violence. Based on my analysis of fictional television programming, only about one act in six is portrayed as being punished, and two out of six are

actually portrayed as being rewarded. The NTVS (1999) study reports a similar pattern of low reward, with only about 20% of violent acts being punished. When we look at who gets rewarded and who gets punished, we see that the villains are more likely to be punished, whereas the heroes, who usually commit as much if not more violence than the villains, are almost never punished. Also, the punishment of villains comes at the end of the program, so although villains get away with dozens of acts of violence that go unpunished at the time, they eventually get punished at the end. Thus the counts of unpunished violent acts underrepresent the meaning of the overall message that villains do eventually get punished. This then explains why the public might think the police are doing a good job. But this pattern is unrealistic.

OTHER MEDIA

There is good reason to believe that the media-generated distortions of reality are even more serious than what has been presented thus far in this chapter. The analyses in this chapter are limited to television content. Although there are no systematic analyses of violent content in other media, there is reason to believe that violence pervades the other media. For example, recent popular novels by John Grisham, Michael Crichton, and Robin Cook—to name only a few respectable thriller authors—have in recent years depicted multiple gruesome murders in the U.S. Supreme Court, in corporate boardrooms, and at top teaching hospitals, but in the real world, murders happen in alleyways, tenements, and homes (Easterbrook, 1996). Thriller authors move murders to glamorous venues for obvious reasons, but then they add lots of realistic detail to make their stories plausible and to get readers to willingly suspend their disbelief. When we do so and let our filters down, we enjoy the entertaining nature of these books—but we also learn that the world is a violent place and there are no places free of violence.

Perhaps the worst synthesized realism is the obsession with serial murders and thrill killing. Dozens of contemporary movies and pop novels—Thomas Harris's Hannibal Lecter books, *Seven, Natural Born Killers, Copycat,* and many similar works present the perspective that everywhere you look, depraved psychopaths are torturing people to death for kicks. This sort of brutality occurs far more often in books and movies than in real life. According to Peter Smerick, a crime consultant who is a retired agent for the FBI's behavioral sciences division, there have been an estimated two "spree" or thrill

killings per month nationwide in the United States over the last 15 years. Although this figure is far too high for a civilized society, it represents only one seventh of 1% of American murders. Serial killings are exceptionally rare. Almost all murders occur in the context of robbery or between acquaintances or family members. Today, on an annual basis, probably a greater number of serial killings are depicted on screen and on television than occur in real life.

Depictions of Hollywood-style "splatter-death" have even begun to infect literature, under the guise of "realism." For instance, the novel *Accordion Crimes,* by the serious writer E. Annie Proulx, offers a gory death on about every third page. The killings embody what Hollywood scriptwriters call "creative death"—something weird or graphic happens that helps make the crime spree even more horrible and hypnotic to readers.

IMPLICATIONS

If television producers set out to create fantasy, then of course they should be under no obligation to present characters, action, dialogue, or plots like those in the real world. Such is the nature of fantasy. But then media producers should not be allowed to claim that the violence they use to create that fantasy is simply a reflection of the real world. As the arguments in this chapter clearly demonstrate, fictional programming does not reflect the reality of violence in society either in frequency, type, character portrayals, or context.

Even more disturbing than the fantasy patterns in fictional programming is the distortion of violence in nonfictional programming. The world of television news presents the real world as having much more violence than it really does—violence that is much more violent in the media than it is in real life, violence involving women much more than it does in real life, violence perpetrated much less by African Americans than is the case in reality, and violence with consequences of harm to the victims much more sanitized than is the case in the real world.

Are these distortions important? If we view "importance" in terms of consequences to viewers, these distortions appear to be very important. The distortions have the effect of leading viewers to believe that there is much more violence than there is in reality. Furthermore, the distortions make viewers believe that the violence is much more serious (murders and rapes compared with minor assaults) than it really is, while at the same time presenting very little of that violence with harmful consequences to the victims or perpetrators.

Finally, the findings of this analysis raise a serious question about the value of nonfictional programming. If we rely on nonfiction programming to tell us about the parameters and nature of our society, then we are being seriously misled. Nonfictional programming is constructing narratives that are not particularly useful for the purpose of informing us about the nature of our world. Nonfictional television presents a very high rate of aggression, and the most serious forms of that activity (physical violence and crime) are presented at rates far above the rates in the real world. If we use the patterns in the news stories to tell us about the real world, then we become less informed the more we watch. Our continued exposure only reinforces false beliefs about how much violent crime there is and who is committing the violent crime.

Furthermore, the contextual cues in the portrayals are such that they serve to encourage the learning of aggression. That is, there is a low rate of punishment (less than one quarter of all violent acts) and a fairly high rate of lack of consequences (more than half). This pattern of context is fairly similar to the general context in which aggression is portrayed in entertainment programming (e.g., see Potter et al., 1995).

It appears that producers of nonfictional programming, even breaking news shows, are adopting many of the conventions of entertainment programs. As Bennett (1988) argues, news is a consumer good that is manufactured to be interesting to audiences. One of the elements in this manufacturing process is the use of drama: "Reporters and editors search for events with dramatic properties and then emphasize those properties in their reporting" (Bennett, 1988, p. 35). Drama requires conflict, and conflict is often triggered by violence.

Of course, it is understandable that producers of nonfiction programming would feel the same pressures to generate large, loyal audiences that producers of fiction feel. By itself, the desire to attract large audiences is not a problem, but it is a problem when informational programmers spend down their capital of accuracy and then credibility in order to buy those large audiences. Producers of nonfiction content have shifted their focus from the facts (the goal of getting the facts right so as to inform viewers about what they should know) to the market (identifying what viewers want to watch, then constructing those experiences for them in the most entertaining manner possible). From a financial point of view, producers have been successful with this shift. However, the public is not being enriched by this; instead, nonfictional programming is moving the public into a ghetto of misinformation.