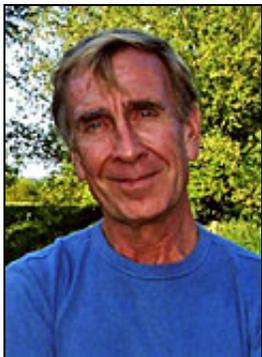


Topics / Violence and the Media / Violence and the Media: Overview

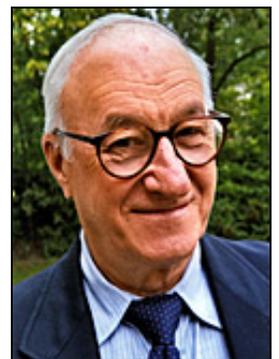
A young man in a dark trench coat embarks on a killing spree at a school. Real life or drama? In fact, it is both. It describes scenes from the 1995 movie *Basketball Diaries* and the 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School. The connection between the two—Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold's actions played out in similar ways to actor Leonardo DiCaprio's character—illustrate the fundamental concern about media violence: that exposure to a barrage of violent imagery over the course of a childhood—from movies, to cartoons, to advertisements, to the Internet—will lead to violent behavior. Baby boomers watched Wile E. Coyote drop rocks, set traps, and try to blow up the Road Runner with an arsenal of products from the ACME company. Today, Comedy Central viewers have watched *South Park's* Kenny killed off in a range of gruesome ways, in every episode, for several seasons, all to the delight of its viewers. The Columbine shooters were fans of *Doom* and part of a generation raised on a diet of battles-to-the-death video games.



An average child leaving elementary school has viewed about 8,000 murders on television. So, it is of little surprise that University of Michigan professor Rowell Huesmann, an expert on the effects of media violence, concludes that the statistical relationship between children's exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior is similar to the statistical relationship between smoking and lung cancer.

Since its widespread adoption as an entertainment medium, television has captured audience attention with violent imagery. One key study—the Surgeon General's 1972 study on television violence—recognized how quickly television became pervasive by reporting that 96% of homes had at least one television and it is turned on an average of six hours a day.

During the decades after television's advent, more sophisticated theories about media effects evolved. No longer did social scientists accept that media directly affected the audience (known as the hypodermic needle effect), but more likely any effects of media are contextualized and audiences filter messages in various ways—through pre-existing belief systems, opinion leaders, or other similar means. The Surgeon General's report tended to bear this out, concluding first, that under experimental conditions (where contextual filters on messages would be controlled) violence depicted on television can generate short term mimicking behavior in children and possibly increased aggressive acts. Probably the most famous of these experiments were Albert Bandura's Bobo doll studies, where children imitated a film of a child punching an inflatable Bobo doll. But Bandura's studies indicate that aggressive behavior is not consistent or uniform, with variations between and among age groups and other factors. Survey research suggests a relationship between television violence and aggression, but it is not clear whether viewing television violence causes aggression or aggression leads to such viewing or whether aggression and viewing television violence are the product of a third factor. The Surgeon General's report did acknowledge that the best predictor of aggression is family or environmental influences. Thus, when it comes to television violence, the most notable impact appears to be on children predisposed to aggressive behavior.



The lack of clear evidence has not daunted parents, legislators, and researchers who continue to raise concerns

about the media violence and its impact on society. There are thousands of studies on media violence. But research still has not adequately demonstrated that exposure to media violence *leads* to violent behavior. And therein lies the dilemma. Research supports a correlation between media violence and aggression. Experimental evidence suggests that under carefully controlled conditions, exposure to media violence may *cause* increased aggression in children. The numerous anecdotal examples of copycat rapes, suicides and violent crime, closely mimicking television drama, movie scenes and provocative song lyrics, simply add fuel to the fire.

During the 1990s, the National Television Violence Project (NTVP) did a three-year study of television violence. Network executive Warren Littlefield appeared before Congress to defend network programming. The debate continues to evolve with those who believe that the existing research, along with anecdotal incidents of copycat violence from media, provide sufficient support to respond to the prevalence of violence in the media. Critics point to the inherent weaknesses in experimental research, the lack of causality in survey research, and the prevailing myths of the overwhelming pervasiveness of media violence in society and its effects on viewers, especially the young.



Attempts to legislate a solution have largely failed because of the lack of causal evidence, as well as the First Amendment implications of censoring content without clear evidence of harm. However, some steps have been implemented to help viewers discern the nature of a program's content and thus, provide some level of a response to concerns about television violence.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 encouraged the television industry to "establish voluntary rules for rating programming that contains sexual, violent or other indecent material about which parents should be informed before it is displayed to children." This

"encouragement" pushed key industry groups, the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable Television Association, and the Motion Picture Association of America to establish the TV Parental Guidelines. This labeling system is designed to indicate, for a given program, the appropriate age group (all audiences, youth, teens, mature audiences) and the specific nature of the content at issue (violence, sex, suggestive language, coarse language). Participation in the ratings system is voluntary, and currently all the broadcast networks and cable networks (except for news and sports programming) participate at some level. While the ratings system is voluntary, the U.S. government required manufacturers to install V-chips in all television sets (13 inches and larger) produced after January 1, 2000. The V-chip and cable consoles allow parents to block specific programs based on their ratings label.

Similar efforts have occurred in the music industry. In 1985, at a time when rap, death metal, and other loud rock music gained popularity, the wives of several congressmen, including Tipper Gore, established the Parents Music Resource Center out of concern about the impact of music lyrics on youth. After intense pressure on the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), an agreement was reached to develop a voluntary labeling system for musical releases with explicit content. All RIAA musical companies participate in the labeling program; independent record labels do not carry what has been called the "Tipper Sticker." Retailers have responded to the labeling program in a variety of ways. Some retailers, including Wal-Mart, will not carry labeled music. Other retailers refuse to sell labeled music to minors, although there is no regulation prohibiting this.



Most of the attempts to label explicit or violent content are rooted in the belief that exposure to violent media content may negatively impact children in particular, or society in general. The concerns about violent media content continues to evolve as more media become available and the government's ability to respond to public concerns is harnessed by the limits of government control over various media industries in an age of deregulation. Added to this

are the limits imposed by the First Amendment on government involvement in creative content.

Media consumers have expanded entertainment options that go beyond television and music recordings. DVDs, video games, the Internet, and the plethora of channels available on digital cable and satellite television all facilitate an environment where the media is competing ever intensely for the attention of a shrinking audience. That struggle pressures media producers to push the envelope further in hopes of holding onto viewers, and thus, continues exacerbate the problem of media violence.

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Further Reading

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[back to top](#) **Entry ID: 913461**