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MASS MEDIA VIOLENCE: THOUGHTS ON THE DEBATE

*Edward Donnerstein**

As a social scientist engaged in this debate, I feel ill at ease. On the one hand, I have served on panels with John Murray and supported him. I have served on panels with Jonathan Freedman and supported him also. I find this area very interesting as a social scientist and one that sometimes disturbs me, disturbs me a great deal, because I think there are several things we have to keep in mind as we begin to think about the debate.

First, the same industry that bothered Senator Paul Simon when he turned on *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, is the same industry which just gave us *Schindler's List*. I am quite sure we would have a great deal of problems with young children having access to *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, but we would probably have little or no problem, nor should we, with easy access to *Schindler's List*.

The problem, however, is that in the social science community, any ratings we would do and any definitions we would come up with, would rate these movies the same in terms of levels of violence. We in the social science community have not gotten to the point where I believe we have an adequate definition of violence. Context is not being taken into consideration, and context *must* be taken into consideration.

With that aside, let me talk a little bit about the research and what I think some of the solutions are. I have a great deal of difficulty with any form of regulation, as it tears very much at my American Civil Liberties Union heart. Although I have done research on pornography and have talked about what I think are the harmful effects of sexually violent material, I have also been very clear in talking about the non-effects of sexually explicit material.

Additionally, as a social scientist, I have written on behalf of

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Infinity Radio in briefs defending Howard Stern. I do not particularly like his show, but as a social scientist I am appalled at the lack of evidence being used by the Federal Communications Commission ("FCC") to support their conclusion that there is a harmful effect. In fact, when you look at the social science evidence on indecency, there is none. The evidence cited for harm against children from indecency is evidence citing television violence or pornography. It has absolutely nothing to do with children and indecency.¹

What about the television violence debate? Over the last few decades, there have been numerous reports on the relationship between media violence and aggression. In fact, in the last year alone the National Academy of Science,² Centers for Disease Control,³ and the American Psychological Association,⁴ have all looked at this issue. I know they have looked at it objectively. I think in one sense, social scientists and other professionals get together to form a consensus: I believe they try to look at all the research as objectively as possible.

Unfortunately, often what we get in the press are the extremes. There are not three thousand studies on television violence. There are perhaps three thousand studies on television. But there probably are approximately two hundred or two hundred and fifty studies directly related to violence in the media.

When you review all those studies, any single study might have a problem. That is the nature of the beast. Correlational studies are just that: correlational. Similarly, laboratory studies are just that: laboratory experiments with a bit of artificiality. Field studies have their own problems. However, if you look at the totality of all the evidence, it seems to point in one direction. That direction has been lost for quite a long time in this debate.

Many in the social science community have misused the term "cause," and gone beyond the data more than they should. But if we shift back for a moment and take a closer look, it is very clear that

1. Daniel Linz et al., *Children's Exposure to and Comprehension of Sexually Oriented Remarks in Radio Broadcasts: A Case Study Analysis of the Howard Stern Show* (1994) (Paper presented at the meeting of the International Communication Association).

2. NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL, *UNDERSTANDING AND PREVENTING VIOLENCE* (A.J. Reiss et al. eds., 1993).

3. CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL, *POSITION PAPERS FROM THE THIRD NATIONAL INJURY CONFERENCE: SETTING THE NATIONAL AGENDA FOR INJURY CONTROL IN THE 1990S* (1991).

4. 1 AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, *VIOLENCE AND YOUTH: PSYCHOLOGY'S RESPONSE* (1993).

there are a multitude of factors which contribute to violent behavior, and they all interact with each other. There is no single cause, just as there is no single cause for any type of behavior we want to examine. You are not going to be able to identify a particular factor that contributes one hundred percent of the variance. It is also not every act of violence in the media which is of concern and which is an issue. Similarly, it is not every child or adult who is the issue. However, there is clear evidence that there is a strong contribution from exposure to media violence. The question, of course, that John Murray and others raise is how strong is that contribution?

If we look at the correlational data, it says that early childhood viewing of mass media violence contributes five to ten percent to adult aggressive behavior. Is that a lot? Is it the most significant contributor? Probably not. The best contributor is aggressiveness as a child, aggression in the home, or a dozen other factors. But, certainly childhood viewing of violent acts has an effect, and that effect lasts for a long, long time.

This does not mean that the mass media is a "cause" of violence. Nobody in the social science community is going to be able to cite such definitive results from any study. We cannot take young children, randomly assign them in their next twenty years of life to diets of violent or nonviolent programming, and follow them up to determine who commits violent acts. We will not and can not do that. However, there are research techniques available to us that have not been available in recent years, such as causal modeling, path analysis and epidemiological studies which we are now able to perform. They are fairly consistent in suggesting that for some young children, particularly those who might be predisposed, the mass media has a strong effect on aggression. I agree with John Murray that the issue of causation is moot.⁵ Maybe it would not be if this were a legal issue.

However, I do not think the research should be used to make legal decisions. I think the research should be used to inform social policy, not to make it, and it certainly should not be used in terms of regulation. The research suggests that independent of why a child is aggressive—whether caused by the media or not—if the child does have certain aggressive predisposition, values, attitudes or behaviors, the mass media can maintain and reinforce them. That is much differ-

5. See John P. Murray, *The Impact of Televised Violence*, 22 HOFSTRA L. REV. 809, 821-23 (1994).

ent from causation and does not suggest regulation. It does suggest that we should think about this contribution, and perhaps do something about it.

If you look at recent national commissions on this issue, the word "causation" is omitted. In fact, quoting the recent American Psychological Association Commission on Youth and Violence, "for the last 20 years there has been one overriding finding, the mass media are significant contributors to the aggressive behavior and attitudes of many children and adolescents."⁶ I think most of us, after a good close look at all the research, without picking the studies apart bit by bit, would draw a fairly similar conclusion.

We can quibble about how strong the effect is, but there is a more apparent and important issue. Television today is not what it was when I was a child. Television tomorrow will not be what it is for our children today. Children have access because of the wonders of new technology which gives us a great deal of positive and educational programming. But because of this technology, children today are going to see material we probably never intended for them to see. We are going to have to begin to deal with that issue.

Take, for example, the film *Basic Instinct*. How many would have their children see this film? Probably none. It is rated R due to a little bondage, a little erotica, a few ice picks. For adults there is probably not a problem with the sexualized violence, but because of advances in technologies, the ability of a young child today to have access to that film is fairly easy. It is easier than I think we ever wanted it to be, and I do not think we have to be social scientists or psychiatrists to contemplate the implications. Young children are sexually curious. We should certainly be concerned about a young child's first introduction to anything that deals with human sexuality in the context of violence.

However, this does not imply the need for any form of regulation. What it does imply is empowering parents so they have information about what is on television. It implies perhaps some time or place self-regulation, which airs those particular shows later at night with a warning or other label. It might also mean strengthening the film rating system so we have information about what films contain in order to make judicial decisions.⁷

6. Edward Donnerstein et al., *The Mass Media and Youth Violence*, in *VIOLENCE AND YOUTH: PSYCHOLOGY'S RESPONSE* (Leonard Eron & Jacky Gentry eds., forthcoming 1995).

7. Edward Donnerstein et al., *Sexual Violence in the Mass Media: Assessing the Viabil-*

Again, that does not mean regulation. I think government interference in this area would be an incredible mistake. In fact, it would be a mistake to base any changes in the law entirely upon the social science data. While we are unable to give the definitive statement that everybody wants, it does not mean there is not an issue to consider.

I think what bothers me most as a researcher is that we spend so much time in this area talking about regulation. There may be reasons some want to because of what the data *might* suggest. But there is a very interesting body of data out there which also suggests that education and media literacy can go an incredibly long way to entirely mitigating the problem we are talking about.⁸

Children can learn to be informed viewers. Children can learn to critically evaluate the mass media. There is research to suggest that if children are aggressive and watch a lot of violent programs but their parents give them information on how to view those programs, the impact of media violence can be mitigated.⁹ Education would go an incredibly long way to deal with this problem. It takes money and time, but it would solve many problems in this particular area.

Legislation is not going to change the problem of easy access. Education, on the other hand, will. V-chips are not going to solve the problem. You can regulate all you want, and unfortunately those parents who would use a V-chip (and those particular parents that would probably use an advisory or warning) are the parents of children most of us probably are not that concerned about. In addition, V-chips scare me for several other reasons. They scare me because I am not sure what violence means. Under our current system, as I mentioned at the beginning of this discussion, *Schindler's List* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* would have the same violent count. Furthermore, V-chips invariably lead, unfortunately, to I-chips for indecency, S-chips for sex, R-chips for religion, and any chip in the alphabet you want. None of that is going to deal with unsupervised children, video on demand, satellite broadcast, and all the other great technologies coming down the line. However, there is one remedy which will deal with the problems listed above if mandated in the elementary schools; critical viewing and violence prevention programs.

ity of Legal Solutions and Recommendations for Social Policy, in VIOLENCE AND THE LAW: APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY ANNUAL (Mark Costanzo & Stewart Oskamp eds., forthcoming 1994).

8. Daniel Linz et al., *Sexual Violence in the Mass Media: Legal Solutions, Warnings, and Mitigation through Education*, 48 J. SOCIAL ISSUES, 145-171 (1992).

9. *Id.*

I hope we can keep government out of the process. I believe we have an incredibly vibrant media industry which can make incredible headway in solving the problems of violence through its own self-regulation and promotion of anti-violent messages.

I think we have to keep one thing in mind as I conclude this discussion. There are many shows on television that have violent content, yet send a much different message to young children about violence. For example, there is a CBS *Picket Fences* two-part series on guns in school. Was it violent? Yes. Would it have to get an advisory? Probably under today's standards it would. Did it send an anti-violent/anti-gun message? Yes.

I am afraid that social science cannot provide answers for all of the questions we have. This is not an area with simple black and white conclusions, and the issue is one that will continue to be debated for years to come. However, the discussions we have among academics, policy makers, and the industry go a long way to helping us better understand the terms of the debate and, more importantly, viable solutions.