Is Media Violence Harmful to Children?

YES: W. James Potter, from On Media Violence (Sage, 1999)

NO: Jib Fowles, from The Case for Television Violence (Sage, 1999)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of communication W. James Potter reviews the research on the influences of media violence and concludes that such violent portrayals increase the probability of many harmful effects for children, most notably aggressive behaviors.

NO: Professor of communication Jib Fowles argues that the results of research showing the harmful effects of media violence on children are either so slight that they can be ignored or so ambiguous that they are open to completely different interpretations.

Poll after poll indicates that one of the primary concerns of contemporary U.S. citizens is violence. Terrorism is obviously one part of this concern, but there is also considerable concern about nonterrorist forms of violence. Violence among the nation’s youth is especially troubling and difficult to explain. This difficulty is frequently the reason that social psychologists are often asked to make sense of seemingly senseless acts of violence. Why are there so many shootings in U.S. high schools? Why are there so many gangs, and why are they growing at such alarming rates?

In attempting to answer these questions, many people, including many social psychologists, wonder about the influence of the media. It is no secret that repeated and often vicious acts of violence are portrayed in many electronic games. Also, television brings countless acts of violence into people’s homes on a regular basis. Indeed, some experts believe that people are so accustomed to media violence that they completely underestimate both the quantity and quality of the violence that they experience every day. Could media violence be a contributor to the aggression seen high schools and among gangs? Do studies of media violence point unequivocally to an affirmative answer to this question?

In the first of the following selections, W. James Potter answers yes to both questions. He outlines in detail the menace of violence in American society and states that such violence has many apparent causes. However, he makes the case that the popular media has to be a prime contributor to these causes not only because it is so visible and attended to by the nation’s youth but also because it is the definer of U.S. culture. Potter then turns to the large body of research on these issues and reviews both the immediate and long-term effects of media violence. Indeed, he contends that these effects are so well established and indisputable that they could easily be considered social science laws, which he describes.

Nothing could be further from the truth, according to Jib Fowles in the second selection. Fowles not only considers Potter’s interpretation of this research disputable, rather than indisputable, but he also considers the findings of these investigations weak, if not misleading. Most such studies, for example, were conducted in the laboratory where the complexity of the everyday world is reduced to overly
simplified and misleading situations. The simplicity of the investigations is not itself the problem; the problem is that the findings of the investigations are generalized to the real world as if the translation is completely straightforward. Fowles asks, Where is the real-world evidence of such media influences? Indeed, when he does turn to investigations of violence in natural settings, he finds little to support Potter’s “empirically established laws.”

**Point**

- Media violence is a prime cause of the violence that infects society.
- The harm of media violence is so well accepted that it is virtually undisputed among psychology research.
- After exposure to countless acts of violence, viewers of such acts have to be affected in some negative manner.
- Many types of negative effects of media violence have been studied and demonstrated.
- Thousands of studies now show conclusively the 10 laws of immediate and long-term media violence

**Counterpoint**

- There is no evidence for this claim.
- Most of the evidence for harmful media influences rests on overly simplifies and reduced laboratory studies.
- This assumes that such viewers are “feckless” and do not actively interpret and purposely process such information.
- These so-called effects are relatively slight, with violence committed against dolls and inanimate objects rather than people.
- Such “laws” do not hold up well in research conducted in natural settings.

**W. James Potter**

**YES**

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**On Media Violence**

**Overview and Introduction**

Violence in American society is a public health problem. Although most people have never witnessed an act of serious violence in person, we are all constantly reminded of its presence by the media. The media constantly report news about individual violent crimes. The media also use violence as a staple in telling fictional stories to entertain us. Thus, the media amplify and reconfigure the violence in real life and continuously pump these messages into our culture.

The culture is responding with a range of negative effects. Each year about 25,000 people are murdered, and more than 2 million are injured in assaults. On the highways, aggressive behavior such as tailgating, weaving through busy lanes, honking or screaming at other drivers, exchanging insults, and even engaging in gunfire is a factor in nearly 28,000 traffic deaths annually, and the problem is getting worse at a rate of 7% per year. Gun-related deaths increased more than 60% from 1968 to 1994, to about 40,000 annually, and this problem is now considered a public health epidemic by 87% of surgeons and 94% of internists across the United States.
Meanwhile, the number of pistols manufactured in the United States continues to increase—up 92% from 1985 to 1992.

Teenagers are living in fear. A Harris poll of 2,000 U.S. teenagers found that most of them fear violence and crime and that this fear is affecting their everyday behavior. About 46% of respondents said they have changed their daily behavior because of a fear of crime and violence; 12% said they carry a weapon to school for protection; 12% have altered their route to school; 20% said they have avoided particular parks or playgrounds; 20% said they have changed their circle of friends; and 33% have stayed away from school at times because of fear of violence. In addition, 25% said they did not feel safe in their own neighborhood, and 33% said they fear being a victim of a drive-by shooting. Nearly twice as many teenagers reported gangs in their school in 1995 compared to 1989, and this increase is seen in all types of neighborhoods; violent crime in schools increased 23.5% during the same period.

This problem has far-reaching economic implications. The U.S. Department of Justice estimates the total cost of crime and violence (such as child abuse and domestic violence, in addition to crimes such as murder, rape, and robbery) to be $500 billion per year, or about twice the annual budget of the Defense Department. The cost includes real expenses (such as legal fees, the cost of lost time from work, the cost of police work, and the cost of running the nation’s prisons and parole systems) and intangibles (such as loss of affection from murdered family members). Violent crime is responsible for 14% of injury-related medical spending and up to 20% of mental health care expenditures.

The problem of violence in our culture has many apparent causes, including poverty, breakdown of the nuclear family, shift away from traditional morality to a situational pluralism, and the mass media. The media are especially interesting as a source of the problem. Because they are so visible, the media are an easy target for blame. In addition, they keep reminding us of the problem in their news stories. But there is also a more subtle and likely more powerful reason why the media should be regarded as a major cause of this public health problem: They manufacture a steady stream of fictional messages that convey to all of us in this culture what life is about. Media stories tell us how we should deal with conflict, how we should treat other people, what is risky, and what it means to be powerful. The media need to share the blame for this serious public health problem.

How do we address the problem? The path to remedies begins with a solid knowledge base. It is the task of social scientists to generate much of this knowledge. For the past five decades, social scientists and other scholars have been studying the topic of media violence. This topic has attracted researchers from many different disciplines, especially psychology, sociology, mental health science, cultural studies, law, and public policy. This research addresses questions such as these: How much media violence is there? What are the meaning conveyed in the way violence is portrayed? and What effect does violence have on viewers as individuals, as members of particular groups, and as members of society? Estimates of the number of studies conducted to answer these questions range as high as 3,000 and even 3,500....

**Effects of Exposure to Media Violence**

Does exposure to violence in the media lead to effects? With each passing year, the answer is a stronger yes. The general finding from a great deal of research is that exposure to violent portrayals in the media increases the probability of an effect. The most often tested effect is referred to as *learning to behave aggressively*. This effect is also referred to as direct imitation of
violence, instigation or triggering of aggressive impulses, and disinhibition of socialization against aggressive behavior. Two other negative—desensitization and fear—are also becoming prevalent in the literature.

Exposure to certain violent portrayals can lead to positive or prosocial effects. Intervention studies, especially with children, have shown that when a media-literature person talks through the action and asks questions of the viewer during the exposure, the viewer will be able to develop a counterreading of the violence; that is, the viewer may learn that violent actions are wrong even though those actions are shown as successful in the media portrayal.

The effects have been documented to occur immediately or over the long term. Immediate effects happen during exposure or shortly after the exposure (within about an hour). They might last only several minutes, or they might last weeks. Long-term effects do not occur after one or several exposures; they begin to show up only after an accumulation of exposures over weeks or years. Once a long-term effect eventually occurs, it usually lasts a very long period of time.

This [selection] focuses on the issues of both immediate effects and long-term effects of exposure to media violence.…

From the large body of effects research, I have assembled 10 major findings. These are the findings that consistently appear in quantitative meta-analyses and narrative reviews of this literature. Because these findings are so widespread in the literature and because they are so rarely disputed by scholars, they can be regarded as empirically established laws.

**Immediate Effects of Violent Content**

The first six laws illuminate the major findings of research into the immediate effects of exposure to media violence. Immediate effects occur during exposure or within several hours afterward.

1. *Exposure to violent portrayals in the media can lead to subsequent viewer aggression through disinhibition.*

   This conclusion is found in the most of the early reviews. For example, Stein and Friedrich closely analyzed 49 studies of the effects of antisocial and prosocial television content on people 3 to 18 years of age in the United States. They concluded that the correlational studies showed generally significant relationships (r=.10 to .32) and that the experiments generally showed an increase in aggression resulting from exposure to television violence across all age groups.

   This conclusion gained major visibility in the 1972 Surgeon General’s Report which stated that there was an influence, but this conclusion was softened by the industry members on the panel.…

   Some of the early reviewers disagreed with this conclusion.…

   In the two decades since this early disagreement, a great deal more empirical research has helped overcome these shortcomings, so most (but not all) of these critics have been convinced of the general finding that exposure to media violence can lead to an immediate disinhibition effect. All narrative reviews since 1980 have concluded that viewing of violence is consistently related to subsequent aggressiveness. This finding holds in surveys, laboratory experiments, and naturalistic experiments. For example, Roberts and Maccoby concluded that “the overwhelming
proportion of results point to a causal relationship between exposure to mass communication portrayals of violence and an increased probability that viewers will behave violently at some subsequent time.” Also, Fredrich-Cofer and Huston concluded that “the weight of the evidence from different methods of investigation supports the hypothesis that television violence affects aggression.”

Meta-analytical studies that have reexamined the data quantitatively across sets of studies have also consistently concluded that viewing of aggression is likely to lead to antisocial behavior. For example, Paik and Comstock conducted a meta-analysis of 217 studies of the effects of television violence on antisocial behavior and reported finding a positive and significant correlation. They concluded that “regardless of age—whether nursery school, elementary school, college, or adult—results remain positive at a high significance level.” Andison looked at 67 studies involving 30,000 participants (including 31 laboratory experiments) and found a relationship between viewing and subsequent aggression, with more than half of the studies showing a correlation ($r$) between .31 and .70. Hearold looked at 230 studies involving 100,000 participants to determine the effect of viewing violence on a wide range of antisocial behaviors in addition to aggression (including rule breaking, materialism, and perceiving oneself as powerless in society). Hearold concluded that for all ages and all measures, the majority of studies reported an association between exposure to violence and antisocial behavior.

On balance, it is prudent to conclude that media portrayals of violence can lead to the immediate effect of aggressive behavior, that this can happen in response to as little as a single exposure, and that this effect can last up to several weeks. Furthermore, the effect is causal, with exposure leading to aggression. However, this causal link is part of a reciprocal process; that is, people with aggressive tendencies seek out violent portrayals in the media.

2. The immediate disinhibition effect is influenced by viewer demographics, viewer traits, viewer states, characteristics in the portrayals, and situational cues.

Each human is a complex being who brings to each exposure situation a unique set of motivations, traits, predispositions, exposure history, and personality factors. These characteristics work together incrementally to increase or decrease the probability of the person’s being affected.

2.1 Viewer Demographics

The Key characteristics of the viewer that have been found to be related to a disinhibition effect are age and gender, but social class and ethnic background have also been found to play a part.

Demographics of age and gender. Boys and younger children are more affected. Part of the reason is that boys pay more attention to violence. Moreover, younger children have more trouble following story plots, so they are more likely to be drawn into high-action episodes without considering motives or consequences. Age by itself is not as good an explanation as is ability for cognitive processing.

Socioeconomic status. Lower-class youth watch more television and therefore more violence.

Ethnicity. Children from minority and immigrant groups are vulnerable because they are heavy viewers of television.
2.2 Viewer Traits

The key characteristics of viewer traits are socialization against aggression, cognitive processing, and personality type.

Socialization against aggression. Family life is an important contributing factor. Children in households with strong norms against violence are not likely to experience enough disinhibition to exhibit aggressive behavior. The disinhibition effect is strong in children living in households in which...children are abused by parents, watch more violence, and identify more with violent heroes; and in families that have high-stress environments. Peer and adult role models have a strong effect in this socialization process. Male peers have the most immediate influence in shaping children’s aggressive behaviors in the short term; adult males have the most lasting effect 6 months later...

Cognitive processing. Viewers’ reactions depend on their individual interpretations of the aggression. Rule and Ferguson (1986) said that viewers first must form a representation or cognitive structure consisting of general social knowledge about the positive value that can be attached to aggression. The process of developing such a structure requires that viewers attend to the material (depending on the salience and complexity of the program). Then viewers make attributions and form moral evaluations in the comprehension stage. Then they store their comprehension in memory.

Cognitive processing is related to age. Developmental psychologists have shown that children’s minds mature cognitively and that in some early stages they are unable to process certain types of television content well.... until age 5, they are especially attracted to and influenced by vivid production features, such as rapid movement of characters, rapid changes of scenes, and unexpected sights and sounds. Children seek out and pay attention to cartoon violence not because of the violence, but because of the vivid production features. By ages 6 to 11, children have developed the ability to lengthen their attention spans and make sense of continuous plots....

Personality type. The more aggressive the person is, the more influence viewing of violence will have on that person’s subsequent aggressive behavior (Comstock et al., 1978; Stein & Friedrich, 1972). And children who are emotionally disturbed are more susceptible to a disinhibition effect (Sprafkin et al., 1992)....

2.3 Viewer States

The degrees of physiological arousal, anger, and frustration have all been found to increase the probability of a negative effect.

Aroused state. Portrayals (even if they are not violent) that leave viewers in an aroused state are more likely to lead to aggressive behavior (Berkowitz & Geen, 1966; Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981; Tannenbaum, 1972; Zillman, 1971).

Emotional reaction. Viewers who are upset by the media exposure (negative hedonic value stimuli) are more likely to aggress (Rule & Ferguson, 1986; Zillmann et al., 1981). Such aggression is especially likely when people are left in a state of unresolved excitement (Comstock, 1985).... In his meta-analysis of 1,043 effects of television on social behavior, Hearold (1986) concluded that frustration... is not a necessary condition, but rather a contributory condition...
Degree of identity. It has been well established that the more a person, especially a child, identifies with a character, the more likely the person will be influenced by that character’s behavior.

Identity seems to be a multifaceted construct composed of similarity, attractiveness, and hero status. If the perpetrator of violence is perceived as similar to the viewer, the likelihood of learning to behave aggressively increases (Lieberman Research, 1975; Rosekrans & Hartup, 1967). When violence is performed by an attractive character, the probability of aggression increases (Comstock et al., 1978; Hearold, 1986). Attractiveness of a villain is also an important consideration (Health et al., 1989)….

2.4 Characteristics in the Portrayals
Reviews of the literature are clear on the point that people interpret the meaning of violent portrayals and use contextual information to construct that meaning.

In the media effects literature, there appear to be five notable contextual variables: rewards and punishments, consequences, justification, realism, and production techniques...

Rewards and punishments. Rewards and punishments to perpetrators of violence provide important information to viewers about which actions are acceptable. However, there is reason to believe that the effect does not work with children younger than 10, who usually have difficulty linking violence presented early in a program with its punishment rendered later (Collins, 1973).

In repeated experiments, viewers who watch a model rewarded for performing violently in the media are more likely to experience a disinhibition effect and behave in a similar manner. But when violence is punished in the media portrayal, the aggressiveness of viewers is likely to be inhibited (Comstock et al., 1978). In addition, when nonaggressive characters are rewarded, viewers’ levels of aggression can be reduced.

The absence of punishment also leads to disinhibition. That is, the perpetrators need not be rewarded in order for the disinhibition effect to occur….

Consequences. The way in which the consequences of violence are portrayed influences the disinhibition effect….For example, Goranson showed people a film of a prize fight in which either there were no consequences or the loser of the fight received a bad beating and later died. The participants who did not see the negative consequences were more likely to behave aggressively after the viewing.

A key element in the consequences is whether the victim shows pain, because pain cues inhibit subsequent aggression. Moreover, Swart and Berkowitz (1976) showed that viewers could generalize pain cues to characters other than the victims.

Justification. Reviews of the effects research conclude that justification of violent acts leads to higher aggression. For example, Bryan and Schwartz observed that “aggressive behavior in the service of morally commendable ends appears condoned. Apparently, the assumption is made that moral goals temper immoral actions….Thus, both the imitation and interpersonal attraction of the transgressing model may be determined more by outcomes than by moral principles.”

Several experiments offer support for these arguments. First, Berkowitz and Rawlings (1963) found that justification of filmed aggression lowers viewers’ inhibitions to aggress in real life.

Justification is keyed to motives. Brown and Tedeschi (1976) found that offensive violence was regarded as more violent even when the actions themselves were not as violent. For example, a verbal threat that is made offensively is perceived as more violent than a punch that is delivered defensively.

The one motive that has been found to lead to the strongest disinhibition is vengeance. For example, Berkowitz and Alioto introduced a film of a sporting event (boxing and football) by saying that the participants were acting either as professionals wanting to win or as motivated by vengeance and wanting to hurt the other. They found that the vengeance film led to more shocks and longer duration of shocks in a subsequent test of participants. When violence was portrayed as vengeance, disinhibition was stronger than when violence was portrayed as self-defense or as a means of achieving altruistic goals.
Young children have difficulty understanding motives. For example, Collins (1973) ran an experiment on children aged 8 to 15 to see if a time lag from portrayal of motivation to portrayal of aggression changed participants’ behaviors or interpretations. Participants were shown either a 30-minute film in which federal agents confronted some criminals or a control film of a travelogue. In the treatment film, the criminals hit and shot the federal agents, displaying negative motivation (desire to escape justice) and negative consequences (a criminal fell to his death while trying to escape). Some participants saw the sequence uninterrupted; others saw the motivation, followed by a 4-minute interruption of commercials, then the aggression. Both 18 days before the experiment and then again right after the viewing, participants were asked their responses to a wide range of hypothetical interpersonal conflict situations. There was a difference by age. Third graders displayed more aggressive choices on the postviewing measure when they had experienced the separation condition; sixth and 10th graders did not exhibit this effect. The author concluded that among younger children, temporal separation of story elements obscures the message that aggression was negatively motivated and punished….

**Realism.** When viewers believe that the aggression is portrayed in a realistic manner, they are more likely to try it in real life.

**Production techniques.** Certain production techniques can capture and hold attention, potentially leading to differences in the way the action is perceived. Attention is increases when graphic and explicit acts are used to increase the dramatic nature of the narrative, to increase positive dispositions toward the characters using violence, and to increase levels of arousal, which is more likely to result in aggressive behavior.…

3. **Exposure to violence in the media can lead to fear effects.**

The best available review is by Cantor (1994), who defines fear effect as an immediate physiological effect of arousal, along with an emotional reaction of anxiety and distress.

4. **An immediate fear effect influenced by a set of key factors about viewers and the portrayals.**

**4.1 Viewer Factors**

*Identification with the target.* The degree of identification with the target is associated with a fear effect. For example, characters who are attractive, who are heroic, or who are perceived as similar to the viewer evoke viewer empathy. When a character with whom viewers empathize is then the target of violence, viewers experience an increased feeling of fear.

The identification with characters can lead to an enjoyment effect. For example, Tannenbaum and Gaer (1965) found that participants who identified more with the hero felt more stress and benefited more from a happy ending in which their stress was reduced. However, a sad or indeterminate ending increased participants’ stress.

*Prior real-life experience.* Prior experience with fearful events in real life leads viewers, especially children, to identify more strongly with the characters and events and thereby to involve them more emotionally.

*Belief that the depicted violent action could happen to the viewer.* When viewers think there is a good chance that the violence they see could happen to them in real life, they are more likely to experience an immediate fear effect.
Motivations for exposure. People expose themselves to media violence for many different reasons. Certain reasons for exposure can reduce a fear effect. If people’s motivation to view violence is entertainment, they can employ a discounting procedure to lessen the effects of fear.

Level of arousal. Higher levels of arousal lead to higher feelings of fear.

Ability to use coping strategies. When people are able to remind themselves that the violence in the media cannot hurt them, they are less likely to experience a fear effect.

Developmental differences. Children at lower levels of cognitive development are unable to follow plot lines well, so they are more influence by individual violent episodes, which seem to appear randomly and without motivation.

Ability to perceive the reality of the portrayals. Children are less able than older viewers to understand the fantasy nature of certain violent portrayals.

4.2 Portrayal Factors

Type of stimulus. Cantor (1994) says that the fright effect is triggered by three categories of stimuli that usually are found in combination with many portrayals of violence in the media. First is the category of dangers and injuries, stimuli that depict events that threaten great harm. Included in this category are natural disasters, attacks by vicious animals, large-scale accidents, and violent encounters at levels ranging from interpersonal to intergalactic. Second is the category of distortions of natural forms. This category includes familiar organisms that are shown as deformed or unnatural through mutilation, accidents of birth, or conditioning. And third is the category of experience of endangerment and fear by others. This type of stimulus evokes empathy for particular characters, and the viewer then feels the fear that the characters in the narrative are portraying.

Unjustified violence. When violence is portrayed as unjustified, viewers become more fearful.

Graphicness. Higher levels of explicitness and graphicness increase viewer fear.

Rewards. When violence goes unpunished, viewers become more fearful.

Realism. Live-action violence provokes more intense fear than cartoon violence does. For example, Lazarus et al. found that showing gory accidents to adults aroused them physiologically less when the participants were told that the accidents were fake. This effect has also been found with children. In addition, fear is enhanced when elements in a portrayal resemble characteristics in a person’s own life.

5. Exposure to violence in the media can lead to desensitization.

In the short term, viewers of repeated violence can show a lack of arousal and emotional response through habituation to the stimuli.

6. An immediate desensitization effect is influenced by a set of key factors about viewers and the portrayals.

Children and adults can become desensitized to violence upon multiple exposures through temporary habituation. But the habituation appears to be relatively short-term.
6.1 Viewer Factors
People who are exposed to larger amounts of television violence are usually found to be more susceptible to immediate desensitization.

6.2 Portrayal Factors
There appear to be two contextual variables that increase the likelihood of a desensitization effect: graphicness and humor.

Graphicness. Graphicness of violence can lead to immediate desensitization. In experiments in which participants are exposed to graphic violence, initially they have strong physiological responses, but these responses steadily decline during the exposure. This effect has also been shown with children, especially among the heaviest viewers of TV violence.

Humor. Humor contributes to the desensitization effect.

Long-Term Effects of Violent Content

Long-term effects of exposure to media violence are more difficult to measure than are immediate effects. The primary reason is that long-term effects occur so gradually that by the time an effect is clearly indicated, it is very difficult to trace that effect back to media exposures. It is not possible to argue that any single exposure triggers the effect. Instead, we must argue that the long-term pattern of exposure triggers the effect. A good analogy is the way in which an orthodontist straightens teeth. Orthodontists do not produce an immediate effect by yanking teeth into line in one appointment. Instead, they apply braces that exert very little pressure, but that weak pressure is constant. A person who begins wearing braces might experience sore gums initially, but even then there is no observable change to the alignment of the teeth. This change in alignment cannot be observed even after a week or a month. Only after many months is the change observable.

It is exceedingly difficult for social scientists to make a strong case that the media are responsible for long-term effects. The public, policymakers, and especially critics of social science research want to be persuaded that there is a causal connection. But with a matter of this complexity that requires the long-term evolution of often conflicting influences in the naturalistic environment of viewers’ everyday lives, the case for causation cannot be made in any manner stronger than a tentative probabilistic one. Even then, a critic could point to a “third variable” as a potential alternative explanation.

7. Long-term exposure to media violence is related to aggression in a person’s life.

Evidence suggests that this effect is causative and cumulative (Eron, 1982). This effect is also reciprocal: Exposure to violence leads to increased aggression, and people with higher levels of aggression usually seek out higher levels of exposure to aggression.

Huesmann, Eron, Guerra, and Crawshaw (1994) conclude from their longitudinal research that viewing violence as a child has a causal effect on patterns of higher aggressive behavior in adults. This finding has appeared in studies in the United States, Australia, Finland, Israel, Poland, the Netherlands, and South Africa. While recognizing that exposure to violence on TV is not the only cause of aggression in viewers, Huesmann et al. conclude that the research suggests that the effect of viewing television violence on aggression “is relatively independent of other likely influences and of a magnitude great enough to account for socially important differences.”

The long-term disinhibition effect is influenced by “a variety of environmental, cultural, familial, and cognitive” factors. A major influence on this effect is the degree to which viewers identify with characters who behave violently. For example, Eron found that the learning effect is enhanced when children identify closely with aggressive TV characters. He argued that aggression is a learned behavior,
that the continued viewing of television violence is a very likely cause of aggressive behavior, and that this is a long-lasting effect on children.

Once children reach adolescence, their behavioral dispositions and inhibitory controls have become crystallized to the extent that their aggressive habits are very difficult to change, and achievement [has] been found to be related to this effect. Huesmann et al. concluded that low IQ makes the learning of aggressive responses more likely at an early age, and this aggressive behavior makes continued intellectual development more difficult into adulthood.

Evidence also suggests that the effect is contingent on the type of family life. In Japan, for example, Kashiwagi and Munakata (1985) found no correlation between exposure to TV violence and aggressiveness of viewers in real life for children in general. But an effect was observed among young children living in families in which the parents did not get along well.

8. Media violence is related to subsequent violence in society.

When television is introduced into a country, the violence and crime rates in that country, especially crimes of theft, increase. Within a country, the amount of exposure to violence that a demographic group typically experiences in the media is related to the crime rate in neighborhoods where those demographic groups are concentrated. Finally, some evidence suggests that when a high-profile violent act is depicted in the news or in fictional programming, the incidents of criminal aggression increase subsequent to that coverage.

All these findings are subject to the criticism that the researchers have only demonstrated co-occurrence of media violence and real-life aggression. Researchers are asked to identify possible “third variables” that might be alternative explanations for the apparent relationship, and then to show that the relationship exists even after the effects of these third variables are controlled. Although researchers have been testing control variables, critics are still concerned that one or more important variables that have yet to be controlled may account for a possible alternative explanation of the effect.

9. People exposed to many violent portrayals over a long time will come to exaggerate their chances of being victimized.

This generalized fear effect has a great deal of empirical support in the survey literature. But this relationship is generally weak in magnitude, and it is sensitive to third variables in the form of controls and contingencies. The magnitude of the correlation coefficients ($r$) is usually low, typically in the range of .10 to .30, which means that exposure is able to explain only less than 10% of the variation in the responses of cultivation indicators....

The magnitude of the cultivation effect is relatively weak even by social science standards. Cultivation theorists have defended their findings by saying that even though the effect is small, it is persistent....

This cultivation effect is also remarkably robust. In the relatively large literature on cultivation, almost all the coefficients fall within a consistently narrow band. Not only is this effect remarkable in its consistency, but this consistency becomes truly startling when one realizes the wide variety of measures (of both television exposure and cultivation indicators) that are used in the computations of these coefficients.

10. People exposed to many violent portrayals over a long time will come to be more accepting of violence.

This is the gradual desensitizing of viewers to the plight of victims, as well as to violence in general. After repeated exposure to media violence over a long period of time, viewers lose a sense of
sympathy with the victims of violence. Viewers also learn that violence is a “normal” part of society, that violence can be used successfully, and that violence is frequently rewarded.

The probability of this long-term effect is increased when people are continually exposed to graphic portrayals of violence. For example, Linz, Donnerstein, and Penrod (1988a) exposed male participants to five slasher movies during a 2-week period. After each film, the male participants exhibited decreasing perceptions that the films were violent or that they were degrading to women.

**Conclusion**

After more than five decades of research on the effects of exposure to media violence, we can be certain that there are both immediate and long-term effects. The strongest supported immediate effect is the following: Exposure to violent portrayals in the media increases subsequent viewer aggression. We also know that there are other positive and negative immediate effects, such as fear and desensitization. As for long-term effects, we can conclude that exposure to violence in the media is linked with long-term negative effects of trait aggression, fearful worldview, and desensitization to violence. The effects process is highly complex and is influenced by many factors about the viewers, situational cues, and contextual characteristics of the violent portrayals.

**Jib Fowles**

**NO**

**Violence Viewing and Science**

**Examining the Research**

For the moment, it is prudent not to question the forces that gave rise to the violence effects literature and have sustained it for five decades nor to tease out the unarticulated assumptions enmeshed in it. Let us begin by taking this extensive literature entirely on its own terms. What will become clear is that although the majority of the published studies on the topic do report antisocial findings, the average extent of the findings is slight—often so much so that the findings are open to several interpretations….

Those who pore over the violence effects literature agree that the case against televised fantasy viciousness is most broadly and clearly made in the large number of laboratory studies, such as those done by Bandura. Overall, these studies offer support for the imitative hypothesis—that younger viewers will exhibit a tendency to act out the aggression seen on the screen. In this group of studies, many find the issue reduced to a pristine clarity, parsed of all needless complexity and obscurity, and answered with sufficient experimental evidence. What is found in this literature can be rightfully generalized to the real world, some believe, to spark a host of inferences and even policies. However, the laboratory is not the real world, and may be so unreal as to discredit the results.

The unnaturalness of laboratory studies is frequently commented on by those who have reservations regarding this research (Buckingham, 1993, p. 11; Gunter & McAteer, 1990, p. 13; Noble, 1975, p. 125), but the extent of the artificiality is rarely defined, leaving those who are unfamiliar with these settings or the nature of these experiments with little sense of what is meant by “unnatural.” …

[In a behavioral laboratory setting] in a room with other unmet children, the child may be unexpectedly frustrated or angered by the experimenters—shown toys but not allowed to touch them, perhaps, or spoken to brusquely. The child is then instructed to look at a video monitor. It would be highly unlikely for the young subject to sense that this experience in any way resembled television viewing as done at home…Mostly signally, at home television viewing is an entirely voluntary activity: The child is in front of the set because the child has elected to do so and in most instances has elected the
content, and he or she will elect other content if the current material does not satisfy. In the behavioral laboratory, the child is compelled to watch and, worse, compelled to watch material no of the child’s choosing and probably not of the child’s liking. The essential element of the domestic television-viewing experience, that of pleasure, has been methodically stripped away.

Furthermore, what the child views in typical laboratory experiment will bear little resemblance to what the child views at home. The footage will comprise only a segment of a program and will feature only aggressive actions. The intermittent relief of commercials or changed channels is missing, as are television stories’ routine endings bringing dramatic closure in which everything is set right, with the correct values ascendant.

The child then may be led to another room that resembles the one in the video segment and encouraged to play while being observed. This is the room that, in Bandura et al.’s (1963) famous experiment, contained the Bobo doll identical to the one shown on the screen. Is it any wonder that uneasy children, jockeying for notice and position in a newly convened peer group, having seen a videotaped adult strike the doll without repercussions, and being tacitly encouraged by hovering experimenters who do not seem to disapprove of such action, would also hit the doll? As Noble (1975) wryly asked, “What else can one do to a self-righting bobo doll except hit it?” (p. 133). There are typically only a limited number of options, all behavioral, for the young subjects. Certainly, no researcher is asking them about the meanings they may have taken from the screened violence.

In summary, laboratory experiments on violence viewing are concocted schemes that violate all the essential stipulations of actual viewing in the real world (Cook, Kendzierski, & Thomas, 1983, p. 180) and in doing so have nothing to teach about the television experience (although they may say much about the experimenters). Viewing in the laboratory setting is involuntary, public, choiceless, intense, uncomfortable, and single-minded, whereas actual viewing is voluntary, private, selective, nonchalant, comfortable, and in the context of competing activities. Laboratory research has taken the viewing experience and turned it inside out so that the viewer is no longer in charge. In this manner, experimenters have made a mockery out of the everyday act of television viewing. Distorted to this extent, laboratory viewing can be said to simulate household viewing only if one is determined to believe so….

The inadequacies of laboratory research on television violence effects are apparent in the small body of research on the matter of desensitization or, as Slaby (1994) called it, “the bystander effect.” The few attempts to replicate the finding of the four Drabman and Thomas experiments (Drabman & Thomas 1974a, 1974b, 1976; Thomas & Drabman, 1975)—that children exposed to violent footage would take longer to call for the intercession of an adult supervisor—have produced inconsistent results. Horton and Santorgrossi (1978) failed to replicate in that the scores for the control group did not differ from the scores for the experimental groups. In addition, Woodfield (1988) did not find statistically significant differences between children exposed to violent content and children exposed to nonviolent content….

A third attempt to replicate by Molitor and Hirsch (1994) did duplicate the original findings, apparently showing that children are more likely to tolerate aggression in others if they are first shown violent footage. An examination of their results, however, does give rise to questions about the rigor of the research. This experiment was set up with the active collaboration of the original researchers and may be less of an attempt to relegate (or not) than an attempt to vindicate. Forty-two Catholic school fourth- and fifth-grade children were assigned to two treatment groups (there was no control group). As for all laboratory experiments, the viewing conditions were so thoroughly alien that results may have been induced by subtle clues from the adult laboratory personnel, especially for obedient children from a parochial school setting. Children shown violent content (a segment from *Karate Kid*) waited longer on average before requesting adult intervention than did children shown nonviolent content (footage from the 1984 Olympic games). Again, this finding could be interpreted as evidence of catharsis: The violent content might have lowered levels of arousal and induced a momentary lassitude. The findings could also have resulted from a sense of ennui: Postexperiment interviews revealed that all the children shown *Karate Kid* had seen the movie before, some as many as 10 times (p. 201). By comparison, the Olympic contests might have seemed more exciting and stimulated swifter reactions to the videotaped misbehavior.
The first author was one of the laboratory experimenters; therefore, the specter of expectancy bias cannot be dismissed.

Even if desensitization were to exist as a replicable laboratory finding, the pressing question is whether or not the effect generalizes to the real world. Are there any data in support of the notion that exposure to television violence makes people callous to hostility in everyday life? The evidence on this is scarce and in the negative. Studying many British youngsters, Belson (1978) could find no correlation between levels of television violence viewing and callousness to real violence or inconsiderateness to others (pp. 471-475, 511-516). Research by Hagell and Newburn (1994) can answer the question of whether some youngsters who view heightened hours of television become “desensitized” to violence and embark on criminal lives; unexpectedly, teenage criminals view on average less television, and less violent content, than their law-abiding peers.

Reviewers of the small desensitization literature conclude there is no empirical evidence that anything like the bystander effect actually exists in real life (Gauntlett, 1995, p. 39; Van der Voort, 1986, p. 327; Zillmann, 1991, p. 124). Even George Comstock (1989), normally sympathetic to the violence effects literature, concedes about desensitization studies that “what the research does not demonstrate is any likelihood that media portrayals would affect the response to injury, suffering, or violent death experienced firsthand” (p. 275).

I now turn from the contrivances of laboratory research to the more promising methodology of field experiments, in which typically children in circumstances familiar to them are rated on aggressiveness through the observation of their behavior, exposed to either violent or nonviolent footage, and then unobtrusively rated again. Although this literature holds out the hope of conclusive findings in natural settings, the actual results display a disquietingly wide range of outcomes. Some of the data gathered indicate, instead of an elevation in aggressive behaviors, a diminishment in aggressive behaviors, a diminishment in aggressive behaviors following several weeks of high-violence viewing. Feshbach and Singer (1971) were able to control the viewing diets of approximately 400 boys in three private boarding schools and four homes for wayward boys. For 6 weeks, half the boys were randomly assigned to a viewing menu high in violent content, whereas the other half made their selections from nonaggressive shows. Aggression levels were determined by trained observers in the weeks before and after the controlled viewing period. No behavioral differences were reported for the adolescents in the private schools, but among the poorer, semidelinquent youths, those who had been watching the more violent shows were calmer than their peers on the blander viewing diet. The authors concluded that “exposure to aggressive content on television seems to reduce or control the expression of aggression in aggressive boys from relatively low socioeconomic background” (p. 145).

Although Wood et al. (1991) report that the eight field experiments they reviewed did, overall, demonstrate an imitative effect from watching televised violence, other reviewers of this literature do not concur (Cumberbatch & Howitt, 1989, p. 41; Freedman, 1988, p. 151). McGuire (1986) comments dismissively on “effects that range from the statistically trivial to practically insubstantial” (p. 213). Most decisively, Gadow and Sprafkin (1989), themselves contributors to the field experiment research, concluded their thorough review of the 20 studies they located by stating that “the findings from the field experiments offer little support for the media aggression hypothesis” (p. 404).

In the aftermath of the thoroughgoing artificiality of the laboratory studies, and the equivocation of the field experiment results, the burden of proof must fall on the third methodology, that of correlational studies. In the search for statistical correlation (or not) between violence viewing and aggressive or criminal behavior, this literature contains several studies impressive for their naturalness and their size. Not all these studies uncover a parallel between, on the one hand, increased levels of violence viewing and, on the other hand, increased rates of misbehavior, by whatever measure. For example, for a sample of 2,000 11- to 16-year-olds, Lynn, Hampson, and Agahi (1989) found no correlation between levels of violence viewing and levels of aggression. Nevertheless, many studies do report a positive. It should be noted that the magnitude of this co-occurrence is usually quite small, typically producing a low correlation coefficient of 10 to 20 (Freedman, 1988, p. 153). Using these
correlations (small as they are), the question becomes one of the direction(s) of possible causality. Does violence viewing lead to subsequent aggression as is commonly assumed? Could more aggressive children prefer violent content, perhaps as a vicarious outlet for their hostility? ...Could any of a host of other factors give rise to both elevated variables?

Following his substantial correlational study of 1,500 London adolescents, Belson (1978) highlighted one of his findings—that boys with high levels of exposure to television violence commit 49% more acts of serious violence than do those who view less—and on this basis issued a call for a reduction in video carnage (p. 526). Closer examination of his data (pp. 380-382), however, reveals that the relationship between the two variables is far more irregular than he suggests in his text. Low viewers of television violence are more aggressive than those in the moderate to high range. Moreover, “acts of serious violence” constituted only one of Belson’s four measures of real-life aggression: the other three were “total number of acts of violence,” “total number of acts of violence weighted by degree of severity of the act,” and “total number of violent acts excluding minor ones.” Findings for these three variables cannot be said to substantiate Belson’s conclusion. That is, for these measures, the linking of violence viewing to subsequent aggression was negated by reverse correlations—that aggressive youngsters sought out violent content (pp. 389-392). Three of his measures refuted his argument, but Belson chose to emphasize a fourth, itself a demonstrably inconsistent measure....

For the total television effects literature, whatever the methodology, the reviews...by Andison (1977), Hearold (1986), and Paik and Comstock (1994) are not the only ones that have been compiled. Other overviews reach very different summary judgments about this body of studies in its entirety. A review published contemporaneously with that of Andison considered the same research projects and derived a different conclusion (Kaplan & Singer, 1976). Kaplan and Singer examined whether the extant literature could support an activation view (that watching televised fantasy violence leads to aggression), or a null view, and they determined that the null position was the most judicious. They wrote, “Our review of the literature strongly suggests that the activating effects of television fantasy violence are marginal at best. The scientific data do not consistently link violent television fantasy programming to violent behavior” (p. 62).

In the same volume in which Susan Hearold’s (1986) meta-analysis of violence studies appeared, there was also published a literature review by William McGuire (1986). In contrast to Hearold, it was McGuire’s judgment that the evidence of untoward effects from violence viewing was not compelling. Throughout the 1980s, an assured critique of the violence effects literature [was] issued from Jonathan Freedman (1984, 1986, 1988). Freedman cautiously examined the major studies within each of the methodological categories...Regarding correlational studies, he noted that “not one study produced strong consistent results, and most produced a substantial number of negative findings” (1988, p. 158). Freedman’s general conclusion is that “considering all of the research—laboratory, field experiments, and correlational studies—the evidence does not support the idea that viewing television violence causes aggression” (1988, p. 158).

Freedman’s dismissal of the violence effects literature is echoed in other literature reviews from British scholars, who may enjoy an objective distance on this largely American research agenda. Cumberbatch and Howitt (1989) discussed the shortcomings of most of the major studies and stated that the research data “are insufficiently robust to allow a firm conclusion about television violence as studied” (p. 51). David Gauntlett (1995) ...analyzed at length most of the consequential studies. He believes that “the work of effects researchers is done” (p. 1). “The search for direct ‘effects’ of television on behavior is over: Every effort has been made, and they simply cannot be found” (p. 120). Ian Vine (1997) concurs: “Turning now to the systemic evidence from hundreds of published studies of the relationship between viewing violence and subsequent problematic behaviors, the most certain conclusion is that there is no genuine consensus of findings?” (p. 138)....

Discourse Within Discourse
Opened up for inspection, the sizable violence effects literature turns out to be an uneven discourse—
inconsistent, flawed, pocked. This literature proves nothing conclusively, or equivalently, this literature
proves everything in that support for any position can be drawn from its corpus. The upshot is that, no
matter what some reformers affirm, the campaign against television violence is bereft of any strong,
consensual scientific core. Flaws extend through to the very premises of the literature—flaws so total that
they may crowd out alternative viewpoints and produce in some a mind-numbed acquiescence.
Specifically, the literature’s two main subjects—television and the viewer—are assumed to be what they
are not.

Viewers are conceived of as feckless and vacuous, like jellyfish in video tides. Viewers have no
intentions, no discretion, and no powers of interpretation. Into their minds can be stuffed all matter of
content. Most often, the viewer postulated in the effects literature is young, epitomizing immaturity and
malleability. This literature, wrote Carmen Luke (1990), “had constructed a set of scientifically validated
truths about the child viewer as a behavioral response mechanism, as passive and devoid of cognitive
abilities. The possibility that viewers bring anything other than demographic variables to the screen was
conceptually excluded” (p. 281). Although there is ample evidence that the young are highly active,
selective, and discriminating viewers (Buckingham, 1993; Clifford, Gunter, & McAteer, 1995; Durkin,
1985; Gunter & McAteer, 1990; Hawkins & Pingree, 1986; Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Noble, 1975), this is
never the version in the violence effects literature.

Television, on the other hand, is seen as powerful, coercive, and sinister. The medium is not a
servant but a tyrant. It rules rather than pleases. It is omnipotent; it cannot be regulated, switched,
modulated, interpreted, belittled, welcomed, or ignored. All the things that television is in the real world it
is not within the violence effects literature.

The relationship between television content and viewers, as implied in this research, is one way
only, as television pounds its insidious message into a hapless audience; there is no conception of a return
flow of information by which viewers via ratings indicate preferences for certain content rather than other
content. The only result allowable from the viewing experience is that of direct and noxious effects. Other
possibilities—of pleasures, relaxation, reinterpretations, therapy, and so on—are not to be considered.
The television viewing experience, twisted beyond recognition, is conceived of in pathological terms; in
fact, a large amount of the research throughout the past decades has been funded by national mental
health budgets.

All these preconceptions apply before a bit of research is actually conducted. The surprising
result in not that there have been worrisome findings reported but that, given these presuppositions, the
negative findings were not much grander still:…

The war on television violence, the larger discourse, has united many allies with otherwise weak
ties—prominent authorities and grassroots organizations, liberals and conservatives, and the religious and
the secular. We must ask why they put aside their difference, lift their voices together, and join in this
particular cause. This implausible alliance constitutes a force field that waxes and wanes throughout the
decades, losing strength at one point and gaining it at another; it would seem to have a rhythm all its own.
What can account for the regular reoccurrence of this public discourse denouncing television violence?

Challenge Questions

Is Media Violence Harmful to Children?

1. How can two scholarly professors of communication differ so greatly on the meaning and
   implications of the research findings on media violence?
2. Should more weight be given to Potter’s conclusions since a large majority of social scientists
   agree with him? Why, or why not? Is it possible that the majority is being deceived? If so, how?
3. If the media is only one of several contributors to the violence of society, what do you think are other contributors?
4. Do you agree with Fowles that television viewers are treated as if they are passive receivers of media information rather than as active interpreters and processors of such information? Support your position.
5. Is Fowles’s criticism of the research on media violence—that it is too dependent on laboratory studies—a criticism that could be made of other areas of psychological research? If so, describe one such area.