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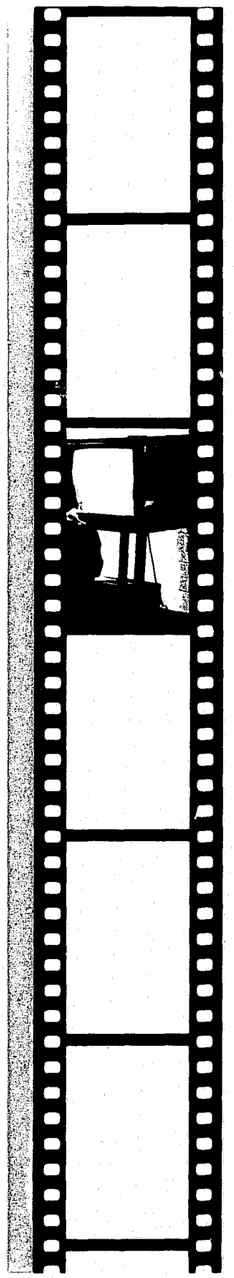

TV and Violence

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Your discussion will be assisted by a close look at the available evidence linking television and violent behavior, by some familiarity with the kinds of research that have been undertaken on television and violence, and by an understanding of the complexities that make research on this subject especially difficult.

Introduction

There is no doubt that mass media have changed what people know and how they think and behave. Exactly how has been the subject of a great deal of speculative thought, imaginative writing, and even some scientific research. Much of this attention has focused on the influence of the mass media on violent behavior.

In the past, other media, such as comic books, radio, and newspapers, were thought to be possible causes of violence. For the past 30 years, however, television has received the most attention.

All media deal with violent subjects either in covering the news or in fictional stories and programs. According to public opinion surveys, a majority of people agree that there is too much violence on television. In 1982 the Gallup organization found that nearly two-thirds of the adult population thought that there was a relationship "between violence on television and the rising crime rate in the United States." Finally, people think that television has a strong influence on children. In one survey by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White, 76 percent of the people questioned agreed that "television has more influence on most children than the parents have." In effect, television's influence has become a socially accepted "fact."

However, the scientific evidence does not support such definite conclusions.

Research on Television and Violence

A considerable amount of research has been concerned with the impact of television on violence. Some of this has been conducted or sponsored by the Federal Government and some of it has been done by academic researchers.

1. ***Government reports***. There have been two major Federal projects. The first, a report to the Surgeon General in 1972, commissioned new research. The second, sponsored by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), reviewed studies done in the 10-year period following the publication of the Surgeon General's Report. The 1972 Report's conclusion was extremely tentative and found "a preliminary and tentative indication of a causal relationship." The 1982 NIMH report was more emphatic in its conclusion that television causes violence. However, this report was criticized severely in an evaluation commissioned by the National Academy of Sciences. The evaluation was undertaken at the behest of the U.S. Department of Justice, which wanted to know whether legislative regulation of television was warranted. The National Academy of Sciences' evaluation concluded that the evidence was insufficient to warrant regulatory or legislative action. The evaluators urged caution in drawing policy recommendations from the available research because it suffers from a number of scientific shortcomings and it deals almost entirely with mild forms of aggression among children, not with criminal behavior.

2. ***Survey studies***. Survey studies examine correlations. From survey studies which measure both how aggressive people are and how much they watch violent programs, we know that people who are antisocially aggressive tend, more than most people, to watch television programs with violent content. It is hard to know what to make of that correlation. It is not clear whether watching more violent programs *causes* people to be aggressive, or whether aggressive people choose to watch more violent programs.

This conundrum is an inherent weakness of survey research, which can indicate whether correlations exist, but not why. And that interpretive problem will become steadily more vexing. Because television is a mass medium, people can select what they want to watch from a wide variety of programs. Cable and satellite delivery systems have made 10 program services available to the average household, and this number will increase in the future.

3. ***Experimental studies***. The basic limitation of surveys — that they reveal *when* two things are correlated but not whether one causes the other — can be avoided by undertaking a different level of research known as "experiments." Experiments are the most reliable kind of research for determining whether one thing causes another. In an experiment, subjects are randomly assigned to different treatments. In an experiment on television violence and violent behavior, some people would be randomly assigned to watch violent programs and others would be shown programs with no violence in them. People's aggressive behavior would be measured then or later, either by observation or through questionnaires. If the two groups truly are assigned randomly, differences between their aggression levels could be tested, using statistical formulas, to see if the differences were larger than would be expected by chance. If they were, an inference could be made that the presence or absence of exposure to material caused the difference.

Experimental studies far outnumber any other kind of study done on this subject. Most are conducted in laboratories where the researcher has a high degree of control over the experiment. A few experiments have also been done in real-life settings such as boys' homes or reform schools.

Laboratory experiments have been used to study whether children will imitate what they see. Most of the experiments deal with mild forms of aggressive behavior directed at toys, although in a few experiments more aggression was observed among children in recess or play situations. Serious interpersonal aggression was not studied because the constraints of research ethics do not allow placing people in real jeopardy.

Other kinds of laboratory experiments have been used to study whether seeing activities depicted in a dramatic story can lead people to act more aggressively. For example, these studies investigate whether people are more likely to imitate aggressive actions when these actions are shown to be justified in the dramatic presentation than when they were shown to be undeserved by the victim. One hypothesis is that watching aggression that is deserved by the character on whom it is inflicted in the film will lower the viewer's inhibitions against acting aggressively toward real people in similar circumstances. That hypothesis has been confirmed by the experimental studies.

The main problem with the experimental studies is that the very feature that gives them their power to detect effects, the degree of control over conditions, also makes one wonder whether they are too artificial to apply to real-life conditions. Just because children will imitate what they see on film or on television in a laboratory does not mean that they will do this in their homes. And even if children, in their play at home, seem to incorporate things they see on television, it does not mean that they will really try to hurt others using methods seen on television.

There are several reasons why one cannot be sure whether the findings of these kinds of studies can be applied to everyday situations. First, violence in real life is rare, is generally discouraged, and is punished, which helps explain why it rarely occurs. In order to encourage "real-life" aggressive behavior on the part of subjects, experimenters need to let the subjects know that they will not be punished. Further, for ethical reasons, experimenters cannot risk encouraging real, serious aggression. Therefore, experiments use substitutes for interpersonal aggression, such as punching a doll or pushing a "shock" button. Finally, the kind of visual violence used in the experiments is selected because it is thought to be the type that has the greatest chance of encouraging aggression. Clear and graphic acts, upon which the subject's attention is forced to focus, are often isolated from other events and are shown out of context. Acts of violence seen in normal television viewing, by contrast, are less graphic than those seen in experiments and are shown in context; moreover, the viewer's attention often is not fully focused on the screen. Thus the intensity of the experimental conditions may bear little resemblance to actual viewing conditions.

Some experimental studies have been done in realistic settings — with inconsistent results. One series of such experiments examined a real episode of a television dramatic program but showed two different endings. In one version, a charity collection box was broken into and the money stolen. This was the antisocial act to be imitated. In the other version, this did not happen, but everything else was the same. Although collection boxes strategically placed by the experimenters in natural surroundings, such as lunch counters, were broken into and the money stolen, those who saw the episode with the experimental ending did not break into the boxes any more often than those who did not. In another realistic experiment, in boys' homes, those who were shown only nonviolent television programs for a number of weeks turned out to be more aggressive than those who watched violent programs for the same period. The likeliest explanation is that the boys who watched only nonviolent programs felt deprived of some of their favorites and acted hostilely as a result. That is a very good example of why experiments in real-life situations may not turn out as neatly as they do in the laboratory.

Better Methods for Study of Television and Aggression

It is difficult to design convincing experimental studies of mass media effects in natural settings, so researchers have turned to other approaches. Two of the best sorts of studies are discussed in the Crime File program.

1. ***Longitudinal panel surveys***. Longitudinal panel surveys can measure interactions between television viewing and aggressive behavior among the same people over a period of time. For example, people might be questioned and tested concerning their viewing habits and their behavior once every 6 months for 3 years. Analysis of their answers over time can indicate if behavior changes are related to viewing.

The virtue of such an approach is that it allows the study of both viewing and behavior as they occur naturally. Other factors that might influence either viewing or behavior, or the relationship between them, may be studied at the same time by collecting extra information in the same surveys. For example, researchers can examine whether television violence has different effects on poor children, the friends of those who commit aggression, those who have emotional problems, or those whose parents don't get along.

However, no research design is perfect. The major problem with this kind of study is that it does not require random assignment of individuals to carefully controlled treatments; one cannot be as sure in an experiment that any one causal factor produced whatever change is observed. In order to rule out other things that might have influenced the outcome, the analyst has to see if changes in aggression vary when the other factors are also examined.

Three major longitudinal panel studies of television and aggression are discussed in the Crime File program. All of these studies have been either of children or of children and teens. One covers a 20-year time span, from the early 1960's to the early 1980's, while the other two followed children over a 3-year period, from 1970 to 1973 and from 1978 to 1981. Although the three studies differed in some details, they shared many features and reached similar results.

All three found a weak tendency for aggressive children to watch more violent television programs, a "correlation" which — as discussed above — could occur because aggressive children prefer violent programs.

The results from the three studies are ambiguous. In some cases, statistical tests showed small associations between viewing and later aggression, but in most cases they did not. In the two 3-year studies, when factors other than television were taken into account statistically, the relationships between television exposure and aggression either diminished or disappeared.

2. ***"Time-series" studies***. Another kind of study, which examines television's effects as they occur in ordinary life, is called a "time-series analysis." These studies take advantage of the social statistics kept by various agencies, such as those on suicides, homicides, and automobile accidents. The study examines whether particular events on television are related to fluctuations within these series of social statistics.

David Phillips has studied what happens to suicide rates after the news media report the suicides of famous people like Marilyn Monroe. He has also attempted to study how suicide rates fluctuate after fictional suicides occur in television soap operas. Other studies have aimed at detecting fluctuations in homicide rates after the death penalty has been administered.

Phillips reported that homicides increase after professional boxing matches and decrease after executions, and that

This program brought to you by the National Institute of Justice. James K. Stewart, Director. The series produced by WETA/COM through a grant to the Police Foundation.

suicides increase after reported suicides of famous people and after fictional suicides have occurred in daytime television soap operas. In several studies, the changes in the social statistics are reported as occurring after a specific short length of time—for instance, exactly 3 days.

The virtue of these sorts of studies is that they involve serious acts of violence and not the playful aggression or other kinds of mild aggression that are usually studied. However, they also have serious drawbacks. First, boxing matches, executions, and suicides in soap operas are rare events, and any mistake can strongly affect one's results. For example, one researcher found two errors in Phillips' study of 22 executions—and these errors reversed the result. Second, other things can happen at about the same time as the events being studied and they can affect the result without being detected. Although the researcher can take as many things as possible into account, it is not possible to take everything into account that may have influenced the statistics.

The topics of Phillips' studies are extremely important. As a result, a number of researchers have attempted to determine if they can reproduce his results, and they have reached different conclusions. It is therefore prudent to wait until other attempts at reproducing Phillips' findings are completed before accepting the remaining studies as conclusive.

No definitive answers have come from other attempts to document the existence of acts in real life that seem to imitate acts depicted on television. One study of 58 incidents of alleged movie-inspired violence, including a number of incidents involving imitation of the Russian roulette scenes in "The Deer Hunter," concluded that no clear evidence of causal links could be found.

Even though most people believe that television influences violent behavior, the scientific evidence is not conclusive. As J.L. Freedman has put it,

> ...the available literature does not support the hypothesis that viewing violence on television causes an increase in subsequent aggression in the real world. It remains a plausible hypothesis, but one for which there is, as yet, little supporting evidence.

This carefully worded conclusion does not say that television has no effect on violent behavior; it says that we do not yet really know whether it does.

We are dealing with what is at most a small influence of television on behavior that is currently more strongly influenced by a host of other factors. It is not surprising that attempts to isolate television's effects in natural settings do not provide conclusive results.

We cannot be sure that our common belief in television's impact on violence is correct. However, since an effect cannot entirely be ruled out, both those who produce television programs, and those who watch them, must be alert to the possibility of a causal link between violent television and violent behavior.

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Discussion Questions

1. Do you think violent television shows cause aggression in young children?

2. If the evidence of a linkage between mass media and violent behavior is inconclusive, why should we worry about the problem?

3. Some people argue that the content of television programs should not be the concern of government, no matter what research shows about its impact on viewers. Do you agree?

4. What is the responsibility of parents in controlling what a child watches on television?

5. Would you favor the establishment of government censorship of violence on television?

This study guide and the videotape, ***TV and Violence***, is one of 22 in the CRIME FILE series. For information on how to obtain programs on other criminal justice issues in the series, contact CRIME FILE, National Institute of Justice/NCJRS, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 or call 800/851-3420 (301/251-5500 from Metropolitan Washington, D.C., and Maryland).

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