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# Mass Media and Violence: Science as Ideology, Ideology as Science

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**Abstract.** This article critiques a commonly promulgated belief that mass media-conveyed violence induces commensurate behavioral violence in its recipients.

One Issue posed to the candidates in the United States (US) presidential election, to candidates in other national, state, and local elections, and to elected and appointed officials is how to handle the alleged noxious consequences of mass media-conveyed violence. This is because enough candidates, officials, voters, and other citizens and residents strongly believe in the strong causal linkage between media violence and commensurate behavioral violence or act as if they do for other political purposes. Especially during intervals wherein violent atrocities are salient--e.g., after students are killed and wounded by other students at school or after the capture of a serial murderer--the causal linkage of media-conveyed graphic violence with grisly examples of violence is thrust to the surface of politics. In addition, the talisman of science is almost always raised in public discourse as proof of this causal linkage. Yet the scientific record is bereft of evidence linking media violence with those real-world incidents inducing the most hue and cry.

Social and political sciences mitigate against the causal linkage. For example, one can make a strong case that per capita violence and even the severity of that violence had been much more significant before the advent of mass media. According to Richard Rhodes, homicide rates in the Middle Ages may have been 10 times what they are in Western nation-states today. If accurate, this observation might logically be used to suggest that the mass media have attenuated violence as opposed to exacerbating it.

Again, following Rhodes, one might note that since World War II, as television ownership has increased in some nation-states, so has violence. In other nation states, as ownership has increased, violence seems to have been relatively static. In the US, violence has more recently been decreasing as the number of media outlets continues to increase.

Psychological research has very frequently been cited as providing proof of the causal linkage between media violence and commensurate behavioral violence. Yet the dependent variables used in this research seem far removed from the violence of most concern to the body politic and the findings do not seem to be consistent. The very well-cited research of Leonard Eron is a case in point.

In 1963, he found that aggressive behavior of boys as rated in school was positively correlated with the violence ratings of their favorite programs as reported by their parents. He also found a negative correlation between total television watching time and aggressive behavior. No consistent correlational relationships were found for girls. In 1972, he found that television violence could account for a larger proportion of variance in aggressive behavior of boys (as rated by their peers) than intelligence quotient scores, social status, ethnicity, and parental disharmony. Of note was that the violence of television programs preferred by 3rd graders was even more strongly related to their aggression 10 years later. In 1982, he integrated findings to conclude that television violence affected subjects' aggression and aggressive subjects watched more violent television. Also, he noted that intervening variables in the television violence-aggression relationship included subjects' identification with aggressive characters

## International Bulletin of Political Psychology

on television and the extent to which subjects believe television portrays reality. In 1984, he more strongly emphasized a multi-process model in which violence viewing and aggression affect each other and, in turn, are stimulated by related variables. In 1987, he strongly advocated that heavy exposure to television violence is one of the causes of aggressive behavior, crime, and violence in society. In 1992, he strongly argued for the cross-cultural validity of his previous findings and advocacy. He reiterated his advocacy in 1994 and 1996 citing his previously published data. After this, he cited larger social learning Issues and their relevance for primary, secondary, and tertiary intervention strategies to reduce aggression.

As can be inferred from the above, the seminal empirical and experimental work of Eron on media violence and aggression does not address the kinds of violence most salient to public discourse on violence. It also does not comprehensively address the notions of adaptive versus unadaptive aggression. His advocacy goes well beyond the data. The same is the case for other contemporary research.

As the first of a number of representative cases, Yukawa and Yoshida (1999) have reported on cognitive, affective, and psychophysiological responses that mediate aggressive thoughts and behavior elicited by media violence. Johnson et al (1997) have reported on racial effects of exposure to violent news stories on judgments of violent behavior. Bushman (1998) has reported on the priming effects of media violence on the accessibility of aggressive constructs in memory. (Interestingly, such constructs would be significantly implicated in the ratings of the aggressive behavior of other people in experiments on the effects of media violence on aggressive behavior.) Zillmann and Weaver (1997) have reported on the effect of prolonged exposure to gratuitous media violence on the acceptance of violence as a preferred means of conflict resolution. (They identified psychoticism as a mediating factor in the posited linkage between media violence and preferred means of conflict resolution.) In 1999, the same two researchers reported that prolonged exposure to gratuitous media violence and provocation by an aggressive other were associated (non-interactively) with markedly increased hostile behavior--both for men and women, even if less hostile overall for women. Aluja-Fabregat and Torrubia-Beltri (1997) have reported that boys who perceived violent cartoon films as being funny and thrilling were deemed more aggressive and excitable by teachers.

Again, it appears that the indices of aggression and violence are different than those most attended to by the body politic. Again the distinction between adaptive and unadaptive aggression does not seem to be especially salient. As well, there continue to be a number of differences and preferred levels of specificity in constructing operational definitions of aggression, violence, and hostility. Moreover, the contextual nature of variables are inconsistently confronted by researchers.

Readers might inquire why, then, does the premise persist of media violence strongly implicated in causing significant violent behavior? One possibility might be the same hope that seems to reify the combination of diet and exercise as the most robust variables in physical health--viz., that one can be in control of one's fate through one's own behavior (cf. Le Fanu, 2000). A second more dark possibility is the aversion to delineating significant incidence and prevalence of abusive child rearing practices as causal factors in aggression--factors that might be more difficult to control than one might think. A third possibility might be the converse of the first--the reality of aggression being largely beyond control is too aversive to seriously accept. In any case, the mass media might wish to aggressively explore the tenacity of the media-violence presumption. (See Aluja-Fabregat, A., & Torrubia-Beltri, R. (1998). Viewing of mass media violence, perception of violence, personality and academic achievement. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 25, 973-989; Bushman, B. J. (1998). Priming effects of media violence on the

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

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