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Ideology Watch: Television as a Source of Violence

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Abstract. This article provides a commentary on a commonly accepted belief about the causal relationship between viewing televised violence and the viewer's violent behavior.

Many behavioral and social science researchers assert that the viewing of televised violence has a causal relationship on the viewer's violent behavior. These assertions vary. One is that the more one views televised violent behavior, the more one is likely to engage in violent behavior. Another is that the more one views televised violent behavior, a response set to engage in violent behavior is created, induced, exacerbated, and manifested. The public policy prescription based on such assertions is that violent content on television should be minimized as much as possible, if not banned. In reading the theoretical and empirical research, however, one might be dismayed by the underpinnings of such assertions and linked public policy.

First of all, mere positive correlation between viewing televised violence and later violent behavior may not involve causality at all. It may be well be that more violent people prefer viewing violence. And if so, televised violence may provide a public service as an identifier of violent people to the extent that violent behavior are to be monitored and sanctioned.

Second, the correlations between the viewing of televised violence and violent behavior often are statistically significant, but of questionable significance for public policy prescription. For example, in a representative, empirical study by Huesmann et al. (2003), correlations between "TV-violence viewing" and "adult physical aggression are 0.17 for males and 0.15 for females. These correlations, while statistically significant based on the number of individuals appraised at the 0.05 level (only 5 out of 100 times would there not be differences between high and low viewers of televised violence on the aggression measure) account for less than 4% of the variance between viewing violence and the viewer's violence according to classical models of parametric statistical inference. In other words, out of a universe of possible causal factors contributing to adult violence that would accumulate to 100%, viewing televised violence would account for 4%. Is this an edifice for public policy prescription leading to televised violence's proscription?

Third, the causal relationship between viewing televised violence and violent behavior of the viewer is often buttressed by the relationship's advocates by offering similar correlations, including verbal aggression, aggression measured by personality inventories, and degrees of physical aggression from mild through severe. The point here is that humans without violence may well be a utopian goal but not one that contributes to ontogenetic and phylogenetic success. A pedestrian observation based on the last comment is that an individual without any aggression may not survive and such an individual may not even be a possibility. Aggression does seem to have a place within a social structure undergirded by public policy. After all, advocates of removing or minimizing televised aggression can be quite aggressive in their advocacy.

Why, then, the strong advocacy for the noxiousness of televised violence based on weak data? The answer may lie in the unfortunate politics of the behavioral and social sciences in which a theory is often

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enough embraced in the service of some ideology, and then data and other theories are sought for support. Such politics, too, can be aggressive, countering the politics as well. And thus the advocacy wars over aggression and television could be a televised blood sport. (See Eron, L.D. (1986). Interventions to mitigate the psychological effects of media violence on aggressive behavior. *Journal of Social Issues*, 42, 155-169; Huesmann, L.R., Moise-Titus, J., Podolski, C-L, & Eron, L.D. (2003). Longitudinal relations between children's exposure to TV violence and their aggressive and violent behavior in young adulthood: 1977-1992. *Developmental Psychology*, 39, 201-221; Nathanson, A. I., Yang, M-S. (2003). The effects of mediation content and form on children's responses to violent television. *Human Communication Research*, 29, 111-134; Paik, H., & Comstock, G. (1994). The effects of television violence on antisocial behavior: A meta-analysis. *Communication Research*, 21, 516-546; Wilson, B. J., Colvin, C. M., & Smith, S. L. (2002). Engaging in violence on American television: A comparison of child, teen, and adult perpetrators. *Journal of Communication*, 52, 36-60.) (Keywords: Ideology, Public Policy, Television, Violence.)