

KILLING TIME OR LEARNING TO KILL -
THE RAMBO FACTOR

The mass media, according to their critics, have a lot to answer for. And at the top of the media blame list comes violence. ...irrational, senseless, out-of-control, sporadic, destructive, evil, tragic. One of the myths of our modern age is that somewhere in the recent past we took a wrong turn in our social evolution that brought us down a path of alienation and hostility, producing the modern phenomenon of the problem of violence in society. It is a myth because public perceptions of the dimensions of that problem are usually a lot larger than the reality. Yet it is a powerful, compelling myth that unifies large sections of our community in a state of anxiety over personal security and the well-being of society. The social malaise of irrational violence often obsesses whole communities, as when a brutal child murder galvanises a town or city into public outpourings of rage and despair. It preoccupies governments and opposition parties, although their frequent pronouncements on the need to combat the problem may well be situated in cynical strategies aimed at milking electoral support from the groundswell of public concern. The finger of blame is pointed at a range of social factors - unemployment, social welfare dependency, poverty, rootlessness, the availability of drugs, alcohol abuse, lax law and order policies, etc. - which are given an ideological focus. But one agency that is consistently accused of at least contributing to social violence and at worst creating it is the mass media for the depiction of violent acts in popular fictional and non-fiction genres.

Television carries the brunt of this accusation. During its rapid evolution over the past 50 years, which involved the adaptation of earlier cinema genres, its audiences have acquired a strong preference for program material with overtly violent themes. It may be the case of these audiences learning to accept and to like the violent programs that the TV producers have offered them, or it may have resulted more from the producers being forced to respond to their audiences' demand for violence. Yet again, TV's immersion in violence may, to some extent, have been derived from earlier pre-television mass media genres, such as the interest in violent crime displayed by the yellow press of the turn of the century. Two generations of TV audiences have been fed on a mixture of Hollywood slayings and news reports that emphasised the aberrational acts of individuals and societies in violent upheaval. Most of us have heard of the American research findings that children growing up in the US witness so many thousand murders on television: the figures vary from researcher to researcher. From westerns to Rambo, television has always been like that, ever since the medium adopted the violent epic in the earliest years of its development. So it was almost inevitable that a link would be drawn between this prominence of violence in TV entertainment and information and the public perceptions of violence as a growing social problem.

The debate over media violence is at the core of the debate over the negative social implications of the media. These days it is probably the gravest charge laid against the media, that they share a responsibility for spreading the evil of social violence. Emotionally charged, the debate often hovers over the heads of our children as the most vulnerable recipients of the media's pervasive messages. The argument tends to ebb and flow with the course of events that shock communities into looking for culprits. The murder of two-year-old James Bolger by a pair of eleven-year-olds in England in 1993 was one of those events. Screen violence -in this case a rather explicit horror flick distributed by video rental stores -was given star billing at the trial of

the two young killers and in the media attention surrounding the case. The Australian experience of linking violent crimes to media violence has centred on some of our recent mass murders: the Hoddle Street and the Queen Street massacres in Melbourne and the Strathfield massacre in Sydney. In each case investigators sought to connect the killers' viewing and reading habits with the motivation for their crimes.

When specific crimes are examined for a media role, a direct media effect is being sought; an effect that switched on the offender's psychotic tendencies and produced the tragic outcome.

But there is also a widespread suspicion that the media have indirect effects on their audiences that produce a range of social behaviour outcomes of less severity than cold-blooded murder. These outcomes range from the passive acceptance of violence as a natural method of dispute resolution; deriving pleasure from watching, listening to or reading about acts of violence; contemplating committing acts of violence in imitation of those portrayed by the media; not feeling disposed towards intervening when witnessing real acts of violence; to committing real acts of violence.

Some people believe this list should include the acceptance of organised or legally sanctioned violence, such as a nation's participation in warfare or violent acts by state security agencies. In fact any response, whether passive or active, to the issue of the use of violence in a social environment can be related to the media's influence in disseminating notions of violence and portrayals of violent acts.

This specific fear of the media's influence has spawned much hand-wringing and impassioned rhetoric by community leaders and social critics. Governments have spent vast sums on inquiries to probe the dilemma. They have legislated regulations and issued guidelines under emotional policy banners. Researchers have spent decades testing theories and have filled volumes with their findings. A bibliography on Violence and Terror in the Mass Media published in 1988 listed 784 different research papers and study reports. In 1972 the US Surgeon General's department spent more than \$1 million in a year-long study of the issue. The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal undertook its own lengthy inquiry in 1989. However, the sum total of this vast amount of investigative effort and the output of the research industry that has grown up around the media violence effects conundrum has really contributed very little to our understanding of the issue. And it has not answered definitively the question: Does media violence cause real violence?

The closest researchers have come to directly addressing this question are heavily qualified and guarded conclusions. The following, by the team of Schramm, Lyle and Parker who carried out a number of studies between 1958 and 1960, is one of the more unequivocal examples: 'For some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For other children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial' (emphasis added).

THE NEEDLE IN THE HAYSTACK

While there have been no conclusive outcomes, the cumulative research effort has produced some findings that may have taken us a little closer to the truth. Tackling the problem from several different approaches, researchers have sought to provide threads of evidence that may eventually be woven together and enable us to reach a verdict. This research task has involved the perspectives and techniques of a range of disciplines, from psychiatry and psychology to sociology and linguistics.

One of the most active areas of research on violence and media effects has involved studies into the content of media output. The main concern of researchers working in this area has been to chart the amount and variety of violent imagery as it is used in media products. Studies of this type can quantify the violent content of television and other media and describe its role within the context of those media products. This research produces lists of carefully categorised violent events and their frequency in different types of TV shows or newspaper articles. It tabulates their occurrences and compares them to other media products. It produces the kind of shocking statistics that tell us how many TV murders children will view before they reach adulthood. Its portrayal of the volume of violence in media products tends to support the contention that media violence is excessive and therefore dangerous.

But content analysis is really a poor tool for studying media effects. For a start it does not consider how the violent acts it describes actually affect their audiences. For example, a violent fate befalling a villain in a TV drama might be applauded by the audience while the same fate befalling the hero might be deplored. Children might be affected by violent images more than adults. People who have had a long exposure to television might be less affected by viewing acts of violence than people with relatively little exposure to the medium. Violent acts in cartoons and comedies are obviously viewed differently from violent acts in dramas and non-fictional programs. Explicit violence in certain program contexts might have a lesser effect on the audience than more subtle portrayals of violence in other contexts. Then again, the way an individual understands and reacts to a media portrayal of violence may depend on the particular circumstances of that individual at the time he or she receives the media message; whether he or she is contented or depressed at the time, whether he or she has just witnessed a violent act in real life, etc. Content has different meaning for different viewers.

Content analysis studies do not compare the frequency of acts of violence in the media with the frequency of non-violent acts. In other words, they only provide very raw data and do not situate that data in the social environment of the audience. They do not, for instance, consider the use of violence in other cultural forms - like Greek epics or Elizabethan dramas or medieval religious art - and the tradition of violence in cultural expression. Content analysis studies are still useful, however, in mapping the use of violence by the media and the raw data they produce can be applied as inputs to other types of studies. It may also eventually be possible to combine content analysis methods with a psychological approach to categorise and quantify how different sections of the audience view different types of violent acts.

Another popular area of research into media effects involves conducting controlled experiments on groups of subjects in an attempt to gauge how individuals react to depictions of violence by various media. This research tradition is best known by some of its most publicised examples. A series of experiments performed during the 1960s sought to test the hypothesis that children would behave aggressively immediately after watching aggressive behaviour on television. In fact those children who were exposed to the aggressive TV display did tend to show more aggressive behaviour traits during the experiment than members of a control group who had not watched the screened aggression. The researchers' conclusion was that the aggressive TV

character had presented a role model to the children and they had chosen to imitate that model when confronted with a situation in which their desires were frustrated.

But other experiments have sought to and succeeded in showing the exact opposite: that violence in the media can have a cathartic effect on its recipients and make them less prone to respond violently to real life situations. These experiments sought to prove the hypothesis that violent behaviour can be the result of tensions and frustrations that may be relieved through the vicarious experience of witnessing violent and aggressive responses to those frustrations in a fictional or dramatised setting. In other words, the desire to behave violently can be transferred to screen characters who act as substitutes for the viewers in their need to act aggressively. The screen portrayal of violence serves as a platform for viewers to act out violent fantasies. The catharthis theory, however, is a minority view and the weight of experimental research has supported the supposition that recipients of violent media images are more likely to have their aggressive tendencies amplified.

Experiments like those mentioned above face a severe reliability problem because of their laboratory nature. Because the subjects are placed in an artificial environment their responses to stimuli may be different from what they would be in real life settings. The context of the viewing experience is radically different from the context in which we normally receive media messages.

Also the exclusion of other stimuli in the laboratory does not replicate the normal situation. Experimental subjects might be more likely to respond to the artificial stimuli of the laboratory than to the same stimuli in an environment where there are many other distracting or compounding stimuli.

The experimental research tradition has a number of weaknesses. An obvious one relates to ethical issues. Most of the experiments used readily accessible subjects such as young children or university students whose responses may not have a wider application to the general community. Few of the experiments were sustained long enough to attempt to gauge any long-term effects, which may be more significant to the study of acquired patterns of violent behaviour than short-term ones. Finally, there is the problem of extrapolating the results of these experiments onto the broader population. Even if they should demonstrate that a group of individuals exposed to media violence in a laboratory setting tended to act more aggressively immediately afterwards, this does not mean that all or even most people would react in the same way.

Another major field of research into media effects is based on surveying media audiences to evaluate their responses to specific media products. This has an advantage over experiment-based research in that it is grounded in a real environment and deals with responses to real media exposure experiences. This area of research originated with media effects studies during the 1940s and '50s which tried to gauge the impact of media messages on voting habits. The voter studies showed that some voters could be swayed by effective media campaigns, creating the expectation that other types of behaviour could be demonstrably modified by media messages. But the promise this held out for researchers - that with the right methodologies they could identify behavioural changes brought about by exposure to media violence -has never been satisfactorily realised. Despite surveys that reached massive proportions there were always too many variable factors to allow a clear cut result.

An early example of such studies -and one of the most ambitious -was undertaken by the British team of Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince in 1958. They surveyed 4500 schoolchildren over a six week period of guided television viewing after which the children were assessed for behaviour and personality traits. The outcome established nothing conclusive, except that some children might be affected in some ways by some programs. During the early days of television it was possible to compare survey results from samples that had been exposed to television with survey outcomes from samples residing in areas yet to be hooked up to TV broadcasting. Still the results were inconclusive. Later researchers bemoaned the fact that more work was not done in those pioneering days when television was in its infancy and it was possible to study large populations just before and just after their first exposure to the new medium. But their claim that an opportunity was lost to learn how the introduction of television changed attitudes and modes of behaviour is invalidated by the fact that parts of the globe are still being introduced to television today. Although the size of this pre-television audience is now very small it is still possible to find Third World communities whose members are yet to join the global TV audience.

Television Violence and the Adolescent Boy was the title of another monumental survey-based study of British teenagers by William Belson. His research, undertaken in the early '70s, was financed by an American TV network- CBS -which had decided to fund a project of this type in response to public and political pressure over the widespread perception of a link between media violence and an upward trend in violent crime. Belson's sample was 1565 London adolescent boys. His methodology was based on the so-called hypothetico-deductive method, which does not seek to prove causal links but tries to determine the degree to which evidence is supportive of an hypothesis. In other words, this method seeks to identify and rate the suggestive factors supporting the hypothesis. However, Belson's study became more of an investigation into the uses of violence by his subjects than an examination of the reasons for their use of violence, and his aim of examining television's role in the acquisition of violent patterns of behaviour appeared to have become submerged in his far broader conclusions. Although Belson did conclude that his evidence had increased the tenability of the hypothesis that high exposure to television violence increased the level of violent behaviour among boys, his study failed to provide the dramatic outcome that had been expected of it and brought the issue of the social effects of TV violence no closer to resolution.

The meagre outcomes of intensive studies using large samples -like those of Belson -convinced researchers to pin their hopes on longitudinal studies that sought to identify changes in attitudes to violence over a long period of time (say, ten years) and then relate those changes to media consumption patterns. But the main problem this approach ran into was the many factors contaminating any such investigation -environmental and contextual factors not related to the mass media -were multiplied by the length of the stud~ Although longitudinal studies were able to point to evidence suggesting links between TV violence and violent attitudes among TV viewers, they never produced the hard evidence that could be used to justify new interventionist media policies. In fact the basic problem with much of this research may have been that it was largely driven by a political agenda; that its purpose was to provide a scientific rationale for the imposition of controls on the mass media to satisfy public and, more importantly; official unease over the media's influence in society. Not that the search for hard evidence to convict the media has been abandoned. Early in 1994 the American TV networks announced handouts of \$US14 million for research projects probing the media effects/social violence question. The networks win social kudos for such gestures which show them as responsible corporate citizens who want to be the first to know if their products are doing any harm. The reality is TV producers know that violence sells and they are quite prepared to spend money to protect that

market. There is also the slight, and by now much receded, risk that someone will one day produce some evidence significantly stronger than the watery outcomes of past studies. But at the same time every study that fails to produce this type of evidence can be interpreted as a vote of confidence in the medium. So both sides, the media detractors and the media themselves, have an interest in pursuing the quest.

SEEKING THE HOLY GRAIL

That quest is destined to lead into more trackless wildernesses of deductions and statistics unless its followers can overcome a number of seemingly insurmountable obstacles which concern the very nature of the mass media and their role in society. The first obstacle is the difficulty of quarantining the media, and whatever influences they may have on their audiences, from other physical and environmental conditions that might distort the way media messages are received by those audiences. Our consumption of media products is rarely a concentrated, isolated activity. We watch television within a dynamic environment to which we are constantly reacting. Typically, that environment is the family living room where all the emotions and activities of family life crowd into the regular evening encounters between family members. In superficial terms these family activities are distractions to the task of receiving a broadcast 1V message. On another level they are determinants of our moods and states of mind that have a major bearing on the quality of our focus on the 1V message. The 1V message is not delivered to us directly but it is transmitted into a room resounding with the echoes of other messages originating within this domestic sphere. The public messages from the 1V set collide with the private messages of the family's interaction. The messages we actually receive are constantly changing blends of information made up of messages constructed for the mass audience and messages exchanged within our private domain. Each message blend is unique to its recipient and to its moment in time.

Thus television messages reach individual members of their audience through various filters. The reception of those messages varies infinitely with the recipient's immediate circumstances. If you have had a tough day at work and there is friction in the family that evening, your experience of watching television and the way you interpret its messages will differ widely from what they might have been if all was harmony at work and at home. The events and circumstances that intrude into our reception of media messages alter those messages for us. The reality of mass media communication is that it is very much a hit or miss affair. The message is constructed and sent out to the audience, but how individual members of that audience receive that message will be determined by a host of external factors beyond the control of the message's originator.

This noise or distortion factor applies to media other than television. Many people read their daily newspapers on the train or bus going to work. Others listen to the radio while they drive to work each morning. Both of these circumstances -with their related stresses and distractions - seem hardly ideal conditions for media reception. The various states of mind they can create - the frustration of delays, the stress of traffic accident near-misses - impact on the way media messages are received by audiences listening or reading under those conditions. How then can any research methodology deal with the problem of determining media effects when the impact of individual media messages on individual recipients is subject to such a wide range of unrelated factors?

This is the problem that has always compromised any media effects research based on controlled experiments. Once you confine the message reception process to an artificial environment you end up with a different message and a different effect. It is impossible to truly recreate mass media communication isolated from its natural environment.

The second obstacle standing in the way of exploring the media violence question is the problem of isolating one particular source of media messages from others. Our consumption of media products is omnivorous. We are assailed with media messages from a host of sources: TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, advertising billboards, in-store public address messages, the sides of buses, the roofs of taxis. The information we receive from these varied sources becomes part of our dialogue with the world and the origin of each segment of information becomes lost in that constant hum of communication. When we attempt to reflect on some piece of information we have received from media sources it is often difficult for us to recall the exact origin of that information. We may recall a particular news story and presume we learned about it by watching a TV news bulletin when in fact our source of the information was a mixture of TV news, newspaper stories and information we received during a private conversation.

Our inability to delineate and recall our media sources prevents researchers from connecting a particular media effect with the messages delivered by a specific medium. Again, this is a problem of contamination. Messages from one medium are contaminated by those messages reaching us from other media. In fact this process of contamination plays an active role in how we use the media. The media's multiple messages and many sources provide us with an immense platter of information from which we select our preferences. By the time we have received the messages of our choice they have lost their individual identities as messages from a particular medium or particular media product. It therefore seems pointless to attempt to connect a behavioural tendency with television, for example, when our broad-spectrum media exposure makes it impossible to determine precisely which medium supplied us with what messages.

An even bigger obstacle lies in the wider problem of linking the mass media with specific tendencies in audience behaviour. We can demonstrate that there is a high level of violent content in the mass media and we can see from statistics that the incidence of social violence is rising; but does this mean that one causes the other? Any study of the media violence effect question necessitates isolating the media from other factors which might influence social behaviour. But this creates a false perspective on the media. Even if we concede that the media can influence attitudes and behaviour, they represent only one of many sources of influence. The media are more likely to react and combine with these other influences, in some cases heightening, but in other cases moderating the effect.

Although there might appear to be an obvious link between a rise in violent crime and an increase in violence in the media, the sequence of cause and effect could be just the opposite: society has become more violent and the media are simply reflecting that trend. The aim of commercial media institutions is to attract audiences by providing them with what they want. If society is becoming more prone to violence then it is natural that audiences will reflect this by demanding more violent media content. Media products with violent content are popular, which is why TV networks use so much violence in their top-rating genres. Audiences choose these products because they prefer them, often over products with low violent content. The anti-media violence lobby will argue that the media are condoning and even promoting violent behaviour by indulging their audiences in providing violent products. This brings us no closer to

understanding what role the media play in the social use of violence -whether media violence is the cause or effect of violence in the community.

Not only is it difficult to determine specific effects from media exposure but it is almost impossible to determine the resonance of those effects. Laboratory experiments might be able to demonstrate that violent television programs can affect a group of subjects in a certain way, but how do we know how long that effect lasts, and whether it will last long enough to cause lasting changes in attitudes or behaviour among the subjects? It is inherent in the nature of mass media communication that media messages reach us fleetingly. They come to us enmeshed in a long, tangled stream of other messages. We often find it difficult to remember details of information we have received via the media, even just a short time afterwards.

On the other hand, one particular media message might not make an impact on us while the cumulative effect of several related messages will. When we talk about media effects, do we mean immediate effects, long-term effects, delayed effects or cumulative effects? Each category has its own research problems. If we are able to demonstrate immediate effects, how then can we know that the effects will be sustained long enough to bring about a modification of behaviour or attitudes? How can we determine long term effects when it is impossible to isolate our subjects from other influences while these effects are forming?

The final obstacle to studying the media violence effects question is the nature of the media audience itself. We are all different; all unique outcomes of the complex mixture of influences that have shaped our lives. These differences determine that our responses to media messages are not uniform, even when we are grouped together according to narrowly defined social categories.

In fact the psychological and personality factors that come into play have a significant bearing on how audiences respond to media messages. A large body of media effects research has sought to find connections between a mass murderer's TV viewing habits and the psychotic state of mind that led to the crimes. However the vast majority of people do not become mass murderers after watching a lot of violent television. Discounting other factors that may have contributed to their states of mind, the mass murderers of this world must have had special personality characteristics that resulted in their brutal and aberrational response to TV violence.

The problem this personality factor creates for media effects researchers is how the outcome of a study involving a control group audience can be projected onto the general population. The task of selecting a control group that truly represents the broader community in terms of the way they respond to media messages seems impossible from the start. Add to that the problem of exposing that control group to a specific set of media messages under normal conditions and we have a set of circumstances that appear to invalidate the outcomes of such studies even before they are reached.

The debate over the media's role in creating a violence-prone society is, like some of the other issues concerning the media's social effects, situated in a climate that is essentially hostile to the media. It seems predicated on the assumption that the media have a case to answer, that a vague body of suspicion coupled with some fragmentary circumstantial evidence is sufficient to indict the media on the charge of undermining society's capacity for peaceful cooperation. This entire question could have been framed quite differently; For instance: What are the sources of the pervasive violent social forces the mass media have revealed? Why do audiences insist on such a large measure of violent imagery in the media products they consume? Why do media

producers who deal in violent themes receive privileged access to the airwaves? On the other hand, the question might not have been framed at all if the media had not already become a scapegoat for other social problems.

SUMMARY

One of the loudest public complaints against the media centres on the fear that they contribute to the incidence of violence in modern society. This concern is based on the perception that violence and violent crimes have increased during recent years -something that is not strictly true -and that violent images on TV and violent messages in other media have played a role in generating this rising level of violence. In fact the violence effects debate has been at the centre of the public acceptance of television since its introduction half a century ago. Violence is extremely popular among TV audiences -which is why violence is so much a part of prime-time mainstream television -but its frequency and graphic intensity is at the same time suspected of influencing susceptible individuals to mimic those acts of violence or to condone the use of violence by others.

Media researchers have, since the beginning of the TV era, been involved in a quest to prove this supposition: that media violence has the effect of producing a more violent society. Despite the conviction of many that this connection is self-evident, no research project yet has come up with irrefutable evidence that the media can affect human behaviour in this way; Efforts to prove the media violence-social violence nexus have included studies based on the observations of psychiatrists whose patients appear to exhibit adverse effects from media consumption; the outcome of experiments -some involving children -in which the subjects are made to react to viewing violent TV images; studies of the TV viewing habits of juvenile delinquents and other criminal offenders; and complex longitudinal studies on the formation of attitudes towards violence among adolescent TV viewers.

The sum total of all this research has been inconclusive and the link between violent behaviour and media consumption has never been proved. Some research has actually pointed to the opposite effect: that viewing violent images on TV acts cathartically for some individuals and provides a safety valve for pent up frustrations that might otherwise find expression in violent behaviour. But the media are often still made the scapegoat each time society is jolted by a horrific mass murder or similar outrage.