

Media and Violence in Youth: A Study in the context of the ‘Mean World Syndrome’

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Abstract

Today, with more recent media developments, the youth is consuming a very high quantity of the aggressive content. Violence in the media influences the youth's world view. It 'cultivates' youth's belief that the world is a mean place with people constantly trying to harm them. Gerbner and his associates' (1980) research of media effects presented in the form of the 'Cultivation theory' have provided a unique perspective by which to examine effects of media. The Cultivation theory given by Gerbner asserts that heavy television viewers will adopt the 'mean world syndrome' as they are exposed to more violence and are therefore made to believe that the world is a far worse and dangerous place than it actually is. In the present study the research evidence is critically assessed along with the psychological theory of 'mean world syndrome' that explains why and how the exposure to violence has a detrimental effect on heavy and light viewers.

INTRODUCTION

Among the most notable changes in the society in 20th and 21st century, one is the saturation of our culture and daily life by the mass media. It is affecting how we get our news, our entertainment and our communication. It becomes, therefore, important to know how the media affects our knowledge, attitudes and our everyday lives, socially as well as politically.

Most of the available research evidence since 1960's has suggested that exposure to violence in mass media in the form of television, movies, video games, cell phones and on internet, increases the risk of violent behaviour in the viewer in a similar way to growing up in an environment filled with real violence increases the risk of them behaving in a violent way.

One indication that often comes forth is that our youth learn violent behaviour by watching the violence on television. Ever since television was introduced in 1939, it

has become the most popular past time for our youth. The young people are spending more time viewing television than the time they put in academics. What is more worrisome is the content that is being viewed during these hours. Various studies done on content in America reveal that prime time programs average eight hostile acts per hour (Hart, 1992). The research suggested that by the age of 18, the average American teen will have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence on television alone. In a study done by UNESCO, it was underlined that television has a dominant role in the lives of young people around the world and its impact on the development of aggressive behaviour, paving the way for a stronger debate between politicians, producers, teachers and parents.

BACKGROUND FOR THE REVIEW:

Different people may have quite different concepts in mind when they think of media violence. Moreover, people may have little consensus on what constitutes aggressive and violent behaviour. Most researchers, however, have clear conception of media violence and aggressive behaviour. Most researchers define violence in media as visual portrayal of acts of physical aggression by one human or human –like a character against another. This definition has evolved as a result of an attempt to describe the kind of violent media presentation that is most likely to teach the viewer to be more violent.

According to most of the researchers, aggressive behaviour is an act that is intended to cause injury or to irritate another person. Laymen may even call a salesman ‘aggressive’ but researchers do not as there is no intention to harm. In this review the term ‘violent behaviour’ is used to describe the serious forms of physical aggression that have a significant risk of seriously injuring the victim. It is believed that violent or aggressive behaviour seldom results from a single cause; rather, many factors over time contribute to such actions. This is why the influence of the violent mass media is best viewed as one of the potential factors the lead to the risk for violence and aggression.

It can be conveniently assumed that there is a great deal of violence on television and it is readily available for our youth for viewing, but the question arises, is there a link between their violent behaviour and the violence they see on television? A major report of a study from the National Institute of Mental Health concluded that violence on television does affect the aggressive behaviour of children and adults and that there were many more reasons for concern about violence on television.

In another long term study done by Leonard Eron and his colleagues in 1968 at the University of Illinois, he found that children who watched many hours of TV violence when they were in elementary school tended to also show a higher level of aggressive behaviour when they became teenagers. He followed up on these youngsters when they were eighteen years old, ten years later, and again found a relationship between TV viewing and aggression. The strongest link was found to be related to the amount of viewing at age eight and the aggressive behaviour at age eighteen. He concluded that present aggressive behaviour was a long term effect of viewing violent television

at an early age (Murray, 1995). Furthermore, Eron followed up on these children as young adults, at age 30 and interestingly enough, he found that there was a relationship between early television viewing and arrest and conviction for aggressive interpersonal behaviour such as spouse abuse, child abuse murder and aggravated assault (Eron, 1992).

A 1992 report by the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth agreed with the findings of Eron and stated that the behaviour patterns established in childhood and adolescence are the foundation for lifelong patterns manifested in adulthood. (APA, 1993, p.15)

MEAN WORLD SYNDROME

Hence forth, another significant effect is to be discussed, which is a result of watching TV violence. This refers to developing a fear of being victimized by violence-also known as the "Mean World Syndrome". It suggests that children or adults who watch a lot of violence on television may begin to believe that the world is as mean and dangerous in real life as it appears on television, and therefore they begin to view the world as a much more mean and dangerous place (AACAP, 1999).

George Gerbner, communication professor, in the 1970's began to study the effects of violence on television. One of his discoveries that were most striking was that watching significant amounts of violence on television changed viewer's outlook on the world. Particularly, those who watched a lot of violent shows on TV began to see the world as a dangerous place. Hence, they were more likely to overestimate the real-world occurrence of crime and violence. This outcome was dubbed as "mean world syndrome", because people who consumed a lot of violence came to perceive the world as a mean and scary place. In the words of a journalist, Scott Stossel, who summarised Gerbner's theory: that, in the end, "we become fearful and anxious-and more willing to depend on authorities and strong measures." There was one study conducted by a research group in 1982 led by George Gerbner at the University of Pennsylvania. After studying for twenty-five years the content of television, Gerbner and his colleagues explored the relationship of the amount of violent television a viewer was exposed to and their perceptions of the world. They found that the amount of television viewed predicted levels of fearfulness. Heavy viewers (four plus hours of viewing per day), as opposed to light viewers (one or two hours a day), were "much more fearful of the world around them, much more likely to overestimate their level of risk, and to overestimate the number of persons involved in law enforcement." (Murray, 1993 p.112). They found that the regular exposure of the television created a sense of vulnerability, dependence, anxiety and fear in people. These people have a greater need to protect themselves; they buy more guns, more watchdogs and more burglar alarms and locks. These people are also more insecure and more apprehensive about their safety, and they also grossly overestimate the national crime rate (Caldrin, 1997).

Bandura (1986) also claimed that television distorts a person's knowledge about the threats and dangers present in the world. Thus, he complimented Gerbner's research

by showing that heavy television viewers were more distrustful of others and tend to overestimate their chances of being criminally victimised. The interesting aspect about these studies was that the viewing and fearfulness relationship held across education levels, gender and income levels.

George Gerbner developed his Cultivation theory to further elaborate upon this mean world syndrome. He tried to explain different effects the television has upon light and heavy viewers. He distinguishes a light viewer as someone whose viewing time is two hours per day as reported by self. Heavy viewers report watching more than four hours or more of television per day. Gerbner believed that the effects of heavy television viewing do not show immediately; however, they do show up over time (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). He along with his associates believes that light television viewers are selective about when and what they watch. A light viewer will seek out a program to watch on television and will then turn off the television after that particular program is finished. In contrast, heavy television viewers not just watch a television but they watch just to watch the television. Moreover, the combination of real life experiences along with heavy television viewing augments the 'cultivation effect'. The viewers will receive, as a result, a double dose of the cultivation effect when heavy viewing is combined with personal experience with violence.

According to Gerbner, high television viewers develop what he calls the 'mean world syndrome' (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). The mean world syndrome refers to the fear of the outside world one starts to feel after watching high levels of television. When someone feels threatened, naturally they desire to be protected from the hostile source. There is adequate research to support the belief that the media plays a vital role in how we perceive the world.

Media acts as a very powerful tool of persuasion. It is important to continue to research its effects. Theory such as the cultivation theory is a good starting point but more advances are required to be made. The need of the hour is critical thinking and persistence to continue our understanding of how the media is affecting us. From the research we have studied so far, although it is thin and limited, we do know that there is reason for concern about violence in the media, particularly violence on television and on young minds.

SUMMARY

This review guides evidence which compellingly points to the conclusion that violence in media increases the risk significantly that a viewer will behave violently. Numerous studies have tried to address this issue of a relationship between TV violence and real crime. Randomized experiments have also shown conclusively that exposure to media violence increases the likelihood of aggressive behaviour in adults.

Thus we can state that in addition to the connection between violence on television and aggression, research has demonstrated other negative effect that is, fear of the world, known as the 'mean world syndrome'. The young people are fearful of having

violent acts done to them and even begin to see the world through pessimistic eyes as a dangerous place. A new scale to determine heavy and light viewing is required in order to further the research into this issue. More such studies and that too in the Indian context need to be undertaken so as to review this situation could obtain more accurate and reliable results by conducting textual analysis of an open ended questionnaire allowing respondents to describe their personal television viewing habits along with survey research.

The present study confirms the belief that the youth is being affected by violence on television, after having gone through the research reviewed. Another significant factor that emerged is that the young minds feel that the world was a mean and dangerous place due to their fear of being a victim of crime. It is important to note that while televised violence may not be the only factor leading to aggressive behaviour, it is a significant one. As Thoman (1999, p.6) meaningfully stated that our goal must be to help our students become "competent, critical and literate in all media forms so that they control interpretation of what they see or hear, rather than let the interpretations control them." Therefore, it is a pressing need of the hour that this issue is addressed and help our youth to become informed consumers of not only messages they receive on television, but all forms of media where violence is perceived.

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