

### In This Issue...

#### **Theme: Media Violence and Media Relationships** **02**

*The question of whether media violence has made real-life violence more acceptable to more people has remained on the margins of the public gun control discussion. In this issue of Connections, we conduct an in-depth investigation of relationships between audiences, media producers and violent media products.*

#### **Research Highlights** **04**

*We discuss the four effects of media violence, and review recent media effects research, as well as research supporting media literacy as an educational intervention. In our second article, we apply theories of audience response to violent media to the American action film. And we examine the possibility that media producers may be shaping audience views of what constitutes realistic media violence.*

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## Theme: Media Violence and Media Relationships

Two weeks ago, President Obama's State of the Union address reached an emotional climax with a defense of new gun control legislation: "The families of Newtown deserve a vote. . .the countless other communities ripped open by gun violence—they deserve a vote." A few weeks earlier, Obama had issued an executive order which received far less attention. In it, he directed the CDC to conduct research into the causes of and prevention of gun violence, including "investigating the relationship between video games, media images and violence" (Bachman, "Obama's Gun Agenda Includes Media Violence Study," *Adweek* online, 16 January 2013).

News articles from *The Washington Post* and other sources report that Adam Lanza, the shooter at Sandy Hook Elementary, owned an extensive library of violent video games. Could he have learned behaviors and attitudes through his game play which contributed to real-world violence? Craig Anderson, a psychologist at Iowa State University who has conducted experimental studies of violent video games for decades, explains: "None of these extreme acts. . .occurs because of only one risk factor; there are many factors, including feeling socially isolated, being bullied, and so on. But if you look at the literature, I think it's clear that violent media is one factor; it's not the largest factor, but it's also not the smallest" (Carey, "Shooting in the Dark," *New York Times* online, 11 February 2013). While it would be sensationalistic, even exploitative, to cite Lanza's actions as clear proof of media influence, the body of research on audience responses to violent media point to a need for media literacy education as a violence prevention strategy.

Media literacy should not be seen only as a preventative strategy for kids and young adults, however. Media literacy skills are also important to the work of citizenship in the aftermath of tragedies such as the Newtown shooting. For those readers who read or viewed news reports about the shooting and its aftermath, what are your recollections about those stories? Who was interviewed, and for what purposes? As the authors of a 2009 news media study argue, many stories about school violence present information within a "problem frame" which generates and amplifies fear among audiences. The authors conducted a content analysis of stories about school crime and violence in *USA Today* and *The New York Times* from 1990 to 2006, and paired the analysis with data from the National Center for Education Statistics. The statistical data indicated a substantial decline in violent crime against students during the study period. The content analysis showed that roughly 42% of articles commented on the rates of violent crime in schools, but only 8% framed the issue as a declining problem.

Moreover, many of the articles provided few resources for discussing school violence as a substantive issue. 47.4% focused on an incident at a single school, and 47.7% relied on the perceptions of parents and students about specific incidents as their main source of information. Parents and students were most likely to discuss how it feels to be a victim, to be related to a victim, or to hold concerns about school violence. Rather than help readers

understand the causes of events or view them within a larger context, these articles were more likely to enhance a sense of imminent threat. Furthermore, 40.3% of articles mention the shooting at Columbine High School, and many of these suggest that Columbine has affected schools across the country in concrete and measurable ways—suggesting that we have entered a new era in which school violence is an inescapable part of American society and must be dealt with accordingly (Kupchik and Bracy, “The News Media on School Crime and Violence”).

Citizenship in a 21<sup>st</sup> century society doesn't just involve rational discussion about policy solutions to urgent social issues. It requires practice with analyzing the ways in which news and other sources of information frame the issues for us, and it requires an awareness of how our emotional reactions to both news and entertainment media can color our responses to the issues as well. In this issue of *Connections*, we conduct a timely, relevant discussion about audiences, media producers, and their relationships with violent media texts. In our first research article, we review some of the recent literature on the social effects of media violence, as well as recent literature supporting the use of media literacy education as an effective intervention for reducing the risks associated with consumption of violent media. In our second research article, we discuss audience attractions to violent entertainment, and suggest that the American fascination with “action” narratives may contribute to a symbiotic interaction between two effects—fear of victimization, and an appetite for media featuring retaliatory violence to allay that fear. In our final research article, we examine recent experimental studies and review historical developments in the representation of violence to suggest that media producers have conditioned audiences to perceive media violence in particular ways. And, in our MediaLit Moment, your upper elementary and middle school students will examine how a commercial can deliver a social message and build the image of a brand all at once.

## Research Highlights

### Four Effects of Media Violence

The CML curriculum *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media* references four effects of media violence. These are:

- Increased aggressiveness and anti-social behavior
- Increased fear of becoming a victim
- Increased desensitization to violence and the victims of violence
- Increased appetite for violence in entertainment and real life

*Beyond Blame* focuses attention on these effects so that students can use critical thinking skills to recognize the influences of violent media in their own lives, and to take action based on what they've discovered for themselves and with others in their class. In addition, the focus of *Beyond Blame*—and any well-designed media literacy unit on this topic-- is to help students understand the interplay between media texts, media producers and audiences that lead to media effects and their negative consequences for our society.

The effects listed above are based on a summary report by the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth published in 1993. Recent research still cites these as recognizable effects of consuming violent media. For example, a 2009 longitudinal survey study found that German secondary school students who were exposed to more violent games reported increased physical aggression 30 months later. The authors argue that the length of time between surveys and the design of the study strengthened the claim that exposure to violent games was responsible for the increases in aggression (Möller and Krahe, "Exposure to Violent Video Games and Aggression").

The effect of fear of victimization is supported by a 2010 study in which participants viewed a violent television program which depicted both violent criminals and corrupt police officers. Some participants viewed episodes of the program more frequently than others, and some viewed episodes in which some of the most vivid images of violence were edited out. The study revealed that people who watched vivid violent media with greater frequency gave higher estimates of the prevalence of crime (and of police immorality) in the real world (Riddle, "Always on My Mind").

In the area of desensitization, one researcher completed a study in 2008 which tested whether exposure to violent entertainment television programs, local newspapers and local television news affected reactions to sample national newspaper stories recounting violent events. 476 adults from three US regions were surveyed, and the survey instrument included eight items to measure empathy ("trait empathy") among respondents. Regression analysis indicated that low trait empathy and heavy consumption of local news predicted blunted emotional responses to the sample stories--a classic desensitization effect. (Scharrer, "Media Exposure and Sensitivity to Violence in News Reports").

Increased appetite for media violence is demonstrated by a 2011 study of 4<sup>th</sup> graders in a Berlin elementary school. Students were asked to list favorite electronic games; completed a questionnaire on leisure time activities, and submitted anonymous peer ratings on the aggressiveness of other students in their class. These were supplemented by teacher ratings of the aggressiveness of individual students. The procedure was repeated a year later. The authors found that openly aggressive children not only maintained but intensified their preference for violent games over time (Von Salisch et al., “Preference for Violent Electronic Games”).

Perhaps the most salient question is which interventions might be able to weaken the link between violent media consumption and problem behaviors in the lives of children and young adults? Evidence that media literacy curricula offer such an intervention is beginning to mount. In 2009, Erica Scharrer published the results of a media literacy program which included instruction on four high-risk portrayals of media violence identified in the National Television Violence Study of 1998. The evaluation of the program demonstrated that students developed critical attitudes towards media violence through comprehension of and critical thinking about the ethical issues involved (“I Noticed More Violence”). An evaluation published last year of a health and media literacy program implemented in two elementary schools in the northeastern US indicated significant increases in students’ understanding that media violence is unrealistic and can make children act more aggressively; and increased student understanding that advertising can make smoking and fast foods look healthy and can affect their desires and behaviors (Bickham and Slaby, “Effects of a Media Literacy Program”).

Last year also saw the publication of a peer-reviewed article which evaluated an implementation of *Beyond Blame*. During the 2007-2008 academic year, 1,693 sixth-eighth grade students from school districts around Southern California participated in the study. Students were assigned to one of three “treatment” conditions: teacher trained in delivery of the curriculum, untrained teacher, and control. A comparison of pre- and post-test responses found that students in both intervention groups were more likely than students in the control group to agree that violent media may cause the effects discussed in the curriculum; and also found that students in the trained group were more likely than controls to understand the five core concepts/key questions of media literacy (Webb and Martin, “[Evaluation of a US-Based Media Literacy Violence Prevention Curriculum](#)”).

For more information on *Beyond Blame*, visit the CML website at [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org)

### Attractions and Reactions to Media Violence

What attracts audiences to media violence? According to Jeffrey Goldstein, audiences are most often attracted to violence when it is embedded in an engaging narrative, and in narratives which have a predictable outcome involving a just resolution with a clear triumph of good over evil (“Why We Watch,” 212-226). Do you have any fond memories of wrapping

yourself up in a comforter and watching a scary movie with a family member or significant other? Research also suggests that violent imagery is more attractive in a safe, familiar environment. Audiences need to feel that someone else is in danger, and that it is imaginary. The protected environment of the home or movie theater also allows audiences to make a choice between empathy and detachment with regard to the characters on screen (Duncum, "Attractions to Violence," 24). In addition, contemporary research suggests that it is not violence per se which most people find attractive, but rather the ability to make judgments about fictional characters with respect to their moral worth (Duncum, 25).

Typical narratives in which transgressive violence is followed with retribution by a protagonist may also trigger a complex set of emotional reactions among audiences. Media researcher Dolf Zillman argues that audiences adopt a "witness perspective" to violent media, and respond to characters much as we do in real life. When we hold a positive view of characters and see them threatened with violence, we experience anxiety and fear as we might in real life—except that we do so within a safe, protective zone. And within that zone, such emotions may still be pleasurable (Zillman, "The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence").

When the moment is reached that the protagonist turns the tables, the excitation from earlier anxiety fuels a euphoric reaction. According to Zillman, the excitement created by retaliation is due in part to what he calls "excitation-transfer," in which one state of excitement transfers to another. According to this theory, emotional arousal often lingers after the cause of it has ceased and one has adjusted cognitively to a new situation. Emotional reactions lag behind cognitive reactions. If residues of the initial emotional response remain at the time of a second emotional stimulus, the second response will be greater than if the residue did not exist. With narratives which move from unjustified violence to retribution, an arousal residue from prior distress intensifies enjoyment, making the initial, transgressive violence an essential precursor to the emotional gratification of the retaliatory violence (Duncum, 28).

All this has wider social implications. According to Zillman, research indicates that people who are fearful of becoming victims are more likely to be drawn toward retaliatory violence because they take pleasure in justice done (op. cit.). Reflecting on the issues at stake, Zillman speculates that the desire of audiences to live in a safe world, especially when feeling threatened, influences the acceptance of violence to secure safety—both on screen and in the real world.

Arts educator Paul Duncum draws on an analysis of American action films to support this theory. In this analysis, violent action heroes may be unsavory characters in one way or another, but still defend a cherished way of life, as well as the basic unit of traditional values, the family. In essence, the violent hero represents the State. He battles against the forces of instability—anarchy, subversion, crime, terrorism-- and defends the family unit against the forces which threaten it (Horsley, "Action-Revenge Films").

The formula not only justifies the violence perpetrated by the hero, but ultimately popularizes it as family entertainment. This has implications for parents and educators as well. Media rated as family fare for American households may include generous helpings of retaliatory violence. Research generally supports this contention. According to one study, violence on prime-time television is perpetrated by protagonists 30% more often than it is by antagonists (Lichter et al., "Examining How Violence Is Presented on Television"). As Duncum remarks, "Truth, justice and the American way are defended by violence more often than threatened by it" (32). And yet American audiences may not be entirely satisfied. Many researchers have shown that, in general, audience anxiety is increased, not decreased, following exposure to media violence (Duncum, 32). Such findings open up the disturbing prospect that action films and programs can lead to a vicious cycle in which fear continually drives audience demand for violent media.

So far we have considered the role of audiences and media texts in this scenario, but, without a doubt, media producers play a role as well. Most producers argue that they are simply responding to audience demands for violent entertainment. While there may be truth to the claim, the evidence is anything but overwhelming. For example, in one recent study, 481 college students viewed different versions of the same prime-time television program: a graphically violent version, a version in which violence was less graphic, and a non-violent version. Participants found the non-violent version significantly more enjoyable than the two violent versions. (Weaver and Wilson, "The Role of Graphic and Sanitized Violence in the Enjoyment of Television Dramas").

Finally, and most importantly, few producers have been willing to admit that the story formula described above has generated significant revenues, and a significant desire to maintain, if not expand their offerings in this genre (Potter, *The Eleven Myths of Media Violence*, chapter 7). While audience reactions to violent media are many and complex, media literacy education is needed to help both children and adults engage in sustained reflection on the role media producers play in shaping their demand for violent content.

### Perceptions of Violence

The *Beyond Blame* curriculum includes a lesson in which students offer their definitions of media violence. That's a valuable exercise to conduct with your own children or students, and not just because they're given the opportunity to apply their analytic skills and to imagine the impact of violence on audiences. When perceptions of violence are discussed, those can be used to target instruction as well.

Two studies from the last decade reveal common patterns of perception, as well as a high degree of variability among subjects. In one study, participants were shown three versions of an episode of "Walker, Texas Ranger." The first version was essentially unedited; the second edited to remove some acts within violent scenes; and the third edited to reduce the number of violent acts to a minimum within each violent scene. After viewing the episodes,

participants completed a questionnaire which asked them to rate the violence in the episode, and to offer their reactions to the violence it contained. Variation among respondents to the same version of the episode was significantly higher than variation in responses to the different versions. As a whole, participants tended to focus on the characteristics of explicitness and graphicness to construct their interpretation of violence (Potter et al., “Perceptions of Television”).

The second study explored audience definitions of violence among two focus groups. An adult group of respondents were shown a variety of fiction films and television programs which featured violence, and given access to video equipment which allowed them to edit excerpts from each to articulate their definitions of violence. A second group of children aged 9 to 13 viewed excerpts of media from a wide variety of genres, and participated in focus group interviews. Adult participants tended to identify lack of moral justification as a defining feature of violence. The realism of violence, particularly its graphic nature, emerged as a secondary definition. Children in this study defined violence through their anxiety about violent scenarios they imagined could happen to them (Morrison and Millwood, “The Meaning and Definition of Violence”).

A common theme emerges from these studies—participants noticed explicit and/or graphic depictions most often, rated them as one of the most important indicators of violence, and also viewed them as the most realistic aspects of screen violence. But media texts and audience characteristics aren’t the only factors at play in these perceptions. Significant evidence points towards the influence of media producers in the articulation of definitions of violence.

In the second study, adult participants included policemen, World War II combat veterans, and lower-income individuals who had witnessed violence in pubs and on the street. Throughout the study, many in this group discussed the violence they had witnessed in real life, yet their judgments regarding realistic screen violence sometimes conflicted with their eyewitness accounts. For example, one policeman remarked, “When you are in a pub fight, it’s over in seconds” (297). Yet the group of policemen editing a scene of a violent beating in a pool hall judged the sounds associated with the beating as one of the elements that made the scene most violent. This characterization becomes even more intriguing when considered together with a statement by a young man familiar with violence. When asked about the differences between real life violence and screen violence, he replied: “There’s not so much noise for a start” (ibid.).

A brief account of the recent history of screen violence may be helpful in explaining media influence on perceptions of realistic violence on screen. In the United States, the Hollywood Production Code of 1934 restricted depictions of cinematic violence. When characters were shot, actors typically clutched their chest and fell to the ground. When the American ground offensive began in Vietnam in 1965, readers of *Life* magazine were encountering images of dead and mortally wounded civilians and U.S. soldiers. The screen violence permitted by the

production code seemed sanitized by comparison. By 1968, the code gave way to the system of ratings in place today.

In 1967 and 1968, two films, Arthur Penn's "Bonnie and Clyde," and Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch," introduced film audiences to much more explicit depictions of violence. Both used slow-motion cinematography and explosive blood "squibs" hidden in actors' costumes to represent gun violence. The final scene of "Bonnie and Clyde," in which the gangsters' bodies were raked by bullets, was praised by film reviewer Pauline Kael for its depiction of "the dirty reality of death" (quoted in Tait, "Visualising Technologies and the Ethics and Aesthetics of Screening Death," 338). Yet in explaining his intentions for the scene, Penn described it as a "ballet of death" (ibid.). The slow motion choreography of both films not only presented images which the human eye would not be able to register in real life, but rendered them as a spectacle to be consumed.

Decades later, this highly aesthetic treatment of violence has become a standard feature of films and television programs across a variety of genres. While the conclusion is not inescapable, it seems likely that audiences have been conditioned by the visibility of death in such scenes as a marker of the "real." If this is the case, audiences may be overlooking other considerations. Is the scenario for the story or the scene in which violence plays a part credible? Credibility apparently plays a part in the definition of violence offered by children in the second study. Teachers and parents would be well advised to help children and students explore the wider contexts of media violence, as well as the sensory aspects of representation in particular scenes.

<http://www.medialit.org>

**Conducting a Close Analysis**

Knowing how to conduct a close analysis of a media text is a fundamental media literacy skill. Learning to conduct a close analysis teaches deep deconstruction skills and enables students to really tune into what is happening in a media text. By looking and listening closely to language, visuals, music, and by asking the 5 Key Questions of Media Literacy throughout the process, you and your students will be surprised at how much is packed into a 140 character tweet or a one-minute movie trailer! You can find "How to Conduct a 'Close Analysis' of a Media Text" in CML's free book titled *Literacy for the 21st Century* (first edition) at [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org). CML's worksheets for deep deconstruction address both content analysis and contextual analysis.

**CONSORTIUM**  
for **MEDIA LITERACY**

*Uniting for Development*

**About Us...**

The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

[www.consortiumformedia literacy.org](http://www.consortiumformedia literacy.org)

## Resources for Media Literacy

**Teaching Tip:** Producers of media use a creative language to heighten fear during violent events. Some of these creative tricks include noise level, lighting, and background music. Who will ever forget the music from the movie *Jaws* as the shark approaches the unassuming swimmers? Are your students aware of these tricks of the trade?

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#### **Other Recommended Resources:**

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## MediaLit Moments

### What's in a Bottle of Coke?

When advertisements attempt to associate certain values with a brand, they often deploy images which subtly reference those values. Not so with a brand like Coca Cola. In 1971, Coca Cola's "I'd like to teach the world to sing" television commercial forged a direct link between Coke and world peace. In this MediaLit Moment, your students will examine a 2013 Superbowl commercial from Coca Cola which utilizes a variety of documentary images to make a statement about the brand. The fun—and the challenge—of the activity lies in identifying the values, lifestyles and beliefs which "fit" within the brand.

*Have students analyze how a television commercial attributes positive values to a brand*

**AHA!** The producers of this commercial want me to believe that Coca Cola is part of everything that's good about the world!

**Key Question #4:** What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

**Core Concept #4:** Media have embedded values and points of view.

**Key Question #5:** Why was this message sent?

**Core Concept #5:** Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.

**Grade Level:** 5-8

**Materials:** computer, high speed internet connection, data projector, screen

**Activity:** Ask students if any of them watched the Superbowl. Did they have any favorite commercials? Do they remember any that were really patriotic? Commercials for Jeep and Dodge trucks might come to mind. Tell students that they're going to take a closer look at a Superbowl commercial for Coca Cola which also says that the product stands for something: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sngjAw3TRPk>

Play the commercial twice and allow students some time for comments and questions. The commercial makes use of security camera footage to "discover" people around the world in their best or most altruistic moments. Ask, how does the commercial make them feel? How does the security camera footage in the commercial help to make them feel that way?

If time permits, give them a basis for comparison by playing a Superbowl commercial for Hyundai which utilizes fantasy and wish fulfillment to "say" something about the brand: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CAe-06mUHKl>

Next, discuss Key Question #4 with them, and ask them to apply the question directly to the Coca Cola commercial. If time permits, ask them to consider the music and captions that frame the security camera content.

Discuss Core Concept #5 with students, and ask a few questions about the product and the purpose of the commercial. Where does the product appear in the commercial? What do the final images suggest about the product? Overall, what does the commercial “say” about Coca Cola? Why would the producers of the commercial want to say this?

The Five Core Concepts and Five Key Questions of media literacy were developed as part of the Center for Media Literacy’s MediaLit Kit™ and Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS)™ framework. Used with permission, © 2002-2013, Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.com>