

In This Issue...

Theme: Media Violence

02

While the sheer volume of violent media available to children can be discouraging, media literacy education continues to provide hope and more importantly, a methodology for reaching and teaching youth.

Research Highlights

03

We survey media violence research, examine the debates that make media violence a “hot” topic, and explain why media literacy education is a game-changing strategy which re-frames the terms of debate.

CML News

07

Stay informed and learn about new resources for teaching media literacy.

Media Literacy Resources

08

Wondering how to find out more on the subject of media violence? Visit our list of books and web sites.

Med!aLit Moments

11

This MediaLit Moment is a simple, engaging thought experiment designed to help your students see action heroes from a variety of perspectives.

Theme: Media Violence

If asked whether you believe you are affected by media violence, how would you respond? According to media scholar W. James Potter, on average 88% of adults polled on this question don't believe they are; however, many people do believe others *are* affected. The persistence of this response to the question is called the "third person" effect (*The 11 Myths of Media Violence*, p.31). Granted, most of us don't commit violent acts following the 6 o'clock news, but does that mean we are not affected in less severe ways? We discuss the significance of four primary effects of media violence in the following pages.

Much of the research and public commentary about the effects of media violence treat viewers of violent media as passive recipients who simply register negative effects. As we argue in our review of media violence research, the life lessons which audiences--including children--take away from violent media content are always the result of a complex process of dynamic interaction between audience and media text.

Teaching children to understand their personal relationship to media is key to becoming media literate, and parents play a vital role in this process. Educating children about their media diet and creating a menu of good media choices is an essential media literacy strategy, but valuable opportunities are lost when violent media content is avoided altogether. We believe it's important for teachers and parents to get actively involved with *all* the media that children are watching and playing.

In 2008, the national British report on children and new media (also known as the Byron Report) demonstrated that, without a grasp of the meanings that children are taking away from media content, parents tend to swing between indifferent, fatalistic, or fearful attitudes about the media their children consume. Spending time with children as they watch violent films or play violent video games will help you make balanced, effective decisions regarding the media you will buy for them and your expectations regarding violent content.

In this issue of *Connections*, we provide information and resources that can help you make those decisions. We outline the history of media violence research, and provide analysis of debates about its validity. We broaden the discussion of media violence with an article on violent content on television news. And in our Resources section we offer links to organizations for further reading on this controversial topic. And don't miss the MediaLit Moment for this issue. It may seem like a simple, disarming experiment, but it could change your students' attitudes towards action heroes entirely!

Research Highlights

Media Effects: A History, and a Response to History

Have you come away from a horror movie feeling “pumped up” after seeing the young heroine outwit the serial killer at the end? Do you have children who like to play “action” video games? Have you noticed how excited they are for the next half hour or so after they’ve finished playing? Perhaps you’re wondering if there’s a science to this that can analyze and predict our reactions to violent media. The answer is yes, and no.

The kind of physiological arousal described in the examples above is one reaction to violent media which many psychological research studies have documented. In addition, forty to fifty years of “media effects” research has revealed a wide range of both short- and long-term effects which violent media content can have on consumers. The Center for Media Literacy’s *Beyond Blame* violence prevention curriculum asks students to reflect on four common effects of media violence*

- Acting aggressively
- Being less willing to help someone in trouble
- Desiring more and more media violence
- Being more afraid of the outside world

Most of the research--as well as public discussion--about media effects tends to focus on consumption of violent entertainment. The research behind the final effect on this list takes into account the likelihood that people watch a significant amount of television programming, including television news coverage, which exposes viewers to live footage and other depictions of violent events.

In the 1960s, media scholar George Gerbner used a variety of surveys to reveal that heavy television viewers tended to view the world as a hostile place. Gerbner called this phenomenon the “mean world syndrome,” and theorized that our media culture as a whole “cultivates” feelings of insecurity, vulnerability and mistrust. Cultivation theory remains an active field of media research.

Where Gerbner argued that violent media cultivate the belief that we live in a violent world, media scholars and critics began to argue in the 1980’s that consumption of violent media leads people to learn new social norms regarding the role of violence in society. The most common of these is the belief that violence is a natural, acceptable way to resolve conflicts.

By the 1990s, research studies bridging the disciplines of psychology and cultural studies began to demonstrate that the majority of violent media portrayals reinforce traditional ideas

*Four Effects of Media Violence identified by the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth, Washington, DC: APA July 1993

about masculine and feminine gender roles, also called gender norms. Many studies also demonstrated that male viewers frequently associate media violence with masculine power (Carter and Weaver, *Violence and the Media*, p. 92). These analyses are a compelling argument for a link between media violence and male violence in contemporary society. Remarkably, a number of lively debates are still taking place about the nature and importance of media effects research. Perhaps the most heated of these focuses on the difference between correlation and causation. The research clearly reveals an *association* between violent media and aggressive behavior. But does violent media content really cause people to behave differently? Or could the relationship go in the other direction? Are some of the research subjects consuming violent media because they have an existing predisposition towards aggressive behavior?

Longitudinal studies which follow the life history of large numbers of people are generally more valuable in proving that media exposure actually results in more violent and anti-social behavior, but it's difficult to identify and control for the full range of factors which may contribute to aggressive behavior among study participants. Over the last five years, more longitudinal studies have used methods which more thoroughly control for these factors. (Recent examples include studies by Jeffrey Johnson at Columbia University and Paul Boxer at Rutgers University).

One important criticism of psychological research involves the nature of the discipline itself. Psychological studies are not designed to document audience interpretations of media content. This really is the province of film, cultural and communications studies. In an essay on video games, Henry Jenkins, a professor of Communication, Journalism, and Cinematic Arts at USC, characterizes the disciplinary divide this way: "Effects are seen as emerging more or less spontaneously, with little conscious effort, and are not accessible to self-examination. But meanings emerge through an active process of interpretation; they reflect our conscious engagement; they can be articulated into words; and they can be critically examined. New meanings take shape around what we already know and what we already think..." ("Make Meaning, Not War").

To some extent, public discussion of media violence has devolved into a stale—and stalemated—debate regarding the existence and severity of media effects. One helpful way to break that stalemate is to complement the public health literature with the humanities research upon which media literacy education has been built. Now would be a very good time for citizens and policy makers to learn what media literacy educators have known for a long time—that audiences respond to the same media messages in different ways, that children can learn how to reflect critically on the media they consume, and that even violent content can be used as a teaching tool.

Television News and Children: A Broader View of Media Violence

Have you ever noticed that no policy measures have been undertaken with regard to violent content on television news programs? Some television news reports can be very graphic, and reports of violent events on television news can arguably have a greater effect on viewers than the realistic fantasies presented in films or video games. But no rating systems have been discussed, and no V-chip has been manufactured which could help parents discuss violent news content with their children.

In the meanwhile, a body of research has accumulated on children's reactions to television coverage of events such as the Challenger explosion and the first Gulf War which demonstrates that children can be negatively affected by television news content. Nor are the effects restricted to immediate fright reactions. Studies of children's emotional reactions to coverage of the September 11th attacks show that the majority of children studied experienced profound stress reactions (Van der Molen, "Violence and Suffering in Television News," p. 1772).

Media effects analysis of television news coverage requires a broader definition of media violence. Studies indicate that elementary school children experience fear in reaction to "regular" news, such as reports of crime, natural disasters, plane and traffic accidents; and have also shown that the emotional consequences of violent events, such as people screaming or crying, can seriously affect children (ibid).

The lack of policy initiatives addressing television news content is not due to ignorance or a lack of imagination, and to some extent it's a matter of design. In the mid-1990s, Congress commissioned a consortium of major research universities to conduct the National Television Violence Study, which quantified, coded and analyzed 10,000 hours of television programming from a variety of broadcast and cable sources (Trend, *The Myth of Media Violence*, p.43). In discussions held with Congress and NTVS, the television industry agreed to participate only if news programming was to be disregarded.

Furthermore, drafting effective policies on television news content might require a candid discussion of the reaction of children to the violence which Congress, the President and the American public authorize. It is far easier for Congressional representatives to take producers of violent entertainment to task for the harm they cause children, and the practice has proven to be an effective re-election strategy as well.

Both parents and teachers can reassure distressed children and help them understand that the threat of physical harm is not as immediate or severe as television news stories might lead them to believe. But media literacy education is certainly needed if they are to help children understand the significance of the *presentation* of television news. Television news coverage of violent events is frequently sensationalized, and delivered with little or no discussion of social, economic or political context. And much of the television news programming available

today is implicitly packaged as a form of entertainment.

Studies that have investigated a public health approach to the reporting of violence have shown that news stories which provide a better contextual framework for violence tend to decrease negative effects of television news violence among adults (Van der Molen, p.1773). Given these results, children could possibly benefit from daily news programs that make television news comprehensible to young viewers. In the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, public broadcasting corporations already have over 20 years of experience with producing 15-minute news programs linked to their adult counterparts.

In any event, parents will need to become critical consumers of television news if they are to convince their representatives of the need for policy changes regarding television news.



Stay Informed

We encourage you to read the [National Education Technology Plan 2010](#) just released by the U.S. Department of Education.



Media Literacy: A System for Change

CML recently published *Media Literacy: A System for Change* by Tessa Jolls. The system, built around CML's research-based framework, Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS), provides a concise and clear method for creating lessons and curricula, as well as an e-book explaining how 21st Century curricula differs from the lessons of the past. Slides for professional development are included to give teachers grounding in Q/TIPS, and for applying the CML framework to curricular content. Visit www.medialit.com for more information.

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

Media Literacy Resources

Teaching Tip: Become familiar with the way your students use and react to the media they consume. Take the time to play the video games and see the movies your students are talking about to gain personal insights into their media choices.

Resources for Further Research

Books

Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things*
New York: Basic Books, 1999.

Now available in a tenth anniversary edition, this book by USC sociologist Barry Glassner deftly proves Gerbner's thesis that the news media's coverage of violent events and calculated amplification of risk has successfully led the American public to anticipate danger at every possible juncture—while more systemic (and less easily sensationalized) problems such as poverty fail to receive the attention they deserve.

David Trend, *The Myth of Media Violence: A Critical Introduction*
Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2007.

In writing about the “myth” of media violence, Trend takes aim at parties who took advantage of the moral panic about media violence which ensued after the Columbine shootings. Politicians exploited the issue at election time, researchers funded by government grants were essentially encouraged to overstate their findings, and non-profit organizations overstated the severity of the problem to attract financial contributions. But that's just the first chapter. Trend's short, accessible introduction to the topic covers a lot of ground, from assessing different types of media violence research, the relationship between media violence and collective anxieties, and the economics and marketing of violent entertainment.

Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson, *Grand Theft Childhood: the Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008.

Though this book has been conceived in part as a contrarian reply to research linking video game violence to violence among adolescent players, it's still thoroughly informative. The authors, who are both parents and researchers, explain how lay readers can make some basic evaluations of media violence research, then invite readers to evaluate the research they conducted for the book. Their findings do indicate an association between students who play M (Mature) games and problem behaviors at school, but interviews with students also reveal a keen awareness of the difference between fantasy and real-world violence, and that playing video games is an inherently social activity for many teens.

Diane Levin and Joanne Cantor

<http://www.dianeelevin.com> and <http://www.cyberoverload.com>

Diane Levin is a founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, and Joanne Cantor is the author of *“Mommy I’m Scared”: How TV Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*—so yes, they may take an adversarial stance towards media in their scholarship and teaching. But both are leading scholars on media violence and children. In 2004, Cantor was already publishing research on the effects of television news reports from Iraq on younger viewers. An article adapted from *The War Play Dilemma*, by Levin and Nancy Carlsson-Paige, reveals a balanced, practical approach to advising parents on children’s play with war toys.

Center for Media Literacy, *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media*

Beyond Blame is a 10-lesson curriculum which brings together media literacy, critical thinking and conflict resolution skills to help middle school students become aware of the influences of violent media, understand the way in which violent entertainment is marketed and produced, and identify alternatives to violence in media and real life. In addition to engaging students with media clips and examples that they will readily recognize, *Beyond Blame* meets all relevant state education standards in language arts, health and technology. For more information, visit <http://www.medialit.com>

Kaiser Family Foundation, “Key Facts: TV Violence”

<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Key-Facts-TV-Violence.pdf>

American Academy of Pediatrics, October 2009 Policy Statement on Media Violence

<http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/content/full/124/5/1495>

Both of these documents are useful documents for personal research on media violence issues, and include a substantial list of references.

Craig A. Anderson, et al, “The Influence of Violent Media on Youth,” *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* v.4 n. 3 (December 2003), pps. 81-110.

Anderson, the lead author of this study, is also a leading proponent for the validity of psychological research on media violence; however, this review will still be very useful for lay readers who wish to learn more about media violence research. It competently encapsulates the findings of a large body of research studies, and discusses the psychological theories used to account for the consequences of exposure to media violence. Available as a PDF file:

<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/pdf/pspi/pspi43.pdf>

Media Awareness Network (<http://www.media-awareness.ca>)

The Media Awareness Network’s website offers a variety of information on media violence, including discussion of the business of media violence and an accessible but thorough summary of media violence studies.

Henry Jenkins, "Make Meaning, Not War," *Independent School*, Summer 2004, v. 63 n. 4, p. 38-48.

Before Jenkins' recent move to USC, he was director of the Comparative Media Studies Program at MIT, and one of the principal investigators for the Education Arcade, a consortium of educators and business leaders working to promote the educational use of computer and video games. During that time, he testified before Congress on marketing of violent media to youth following the Columbine shootings, pleaded the cause of media literacy education before the FCC, and played a significant role as a public advocate for fans, gamers and bloggers. In this article, he makes an argument for games literacy, advocating for a curriculum which combines critical analysis of existing commercial games (including violent games) with production projects that can allow students to re-invent game content.

OTHER REFERENCES CITED IN THIS ISSUE

Van der Molen, Juliette, "Violence and Suffering in Television News: Toward a Broader Conception of Harmful Television Content for Children," in *Pediatrics*, v.113 n. 6, June 2004, pps. 1771-1775

W. James Potter, *The 11 Myths of Media Violence*
Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003

Cynthia Carter and C. Kay Weaver, *Violence and the Media*
Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 2003

MediaLit Moments

Time Off for Heroic Behavior

Who are heroes and what makes them special? In this Media Lit Moment, your students will have the chance to analyze the qualities that super-heroes personify and see how everyday people are heroes, too.

Students are asked to imagine what happens to an super-hero character who has suddenly lost his/her special powers. As they compare the lives of these characters with and without their special powers, they'll practice assessing the values and points of view embedded in, or omitted from, the action films and games in which these characters appear.

AHA! You don't need special powers to tackle tough problems!

Have your students imagine what life might be like for an action hero who is unable to be "part of the action" for an extended period of time.

The objective for this activity is for students to understand that certain information is included or omitted in every media message (i.e. The character development of their favorite hero is determined by the author of the message). Ask students to view their characters from different perspectives – life WITH special powers, and life WITHOUT special powers – so they see that there are many ways to solve problems.

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

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

Grade Level: 6-9

Materials: individual handouts, paper, pencil, and imagination

Activity: Students should be organized into pairs to work together. Each pair of students are asked to choose a super-hero and briefly describe his/her special powers. Then, each pair is asked to imagine that their super-hero loses his/her special power, and they must tackle a problem without their special powers. How does the character tackle the problem now? What has the character lost? What has the character gained? What is the same (courage, loyalty, honesty, quick-thinking, etc.) As they compare the impact of special powers on the lives of these characters, they'll see the values and points of view embedded in, or omitted from, the problem solving and story lines that action heroes embody (a film clip of a similar scenario can serve as an example. "Hancock," with Will Smith in the title role, is one possible source to draw from).

Using individual handouts or a white board, give students some questions that can help them to think about the problem-solving the character must do. Here are a few suggestions:

“What are my characters special powers?”

“What do the special powers enable my character to do?”

“What are advantages of these special powers? Disadvantages?”

“Can the character still solve problems without special powers. Why or why not?”

“What is an example of a problem that the character solves?”

“What is it like to solve this problem WITH special powers? What is it like to solve this problem WITHOUT special powers?”

“What characteristics does the super-hero still have, regardless of his or her powers?”

Bring students back together for a whole class discussion. As students share their perspectives, refer to the values, lifestyles and points of view that students reference as they describe their super-heroes' problem solving approaches, and reinforce Key Question #4. Note what is included and what is omitted as a result of the super-heroes changed circumstances.

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, © 2002-2010, Center for Media Literacy, <http://www.medialit.com>