ENDNOTES

[1] Martin Lee and Norman Solomon, *Unreliable Sources* (New York: Lyle Stuart, 1990), p. 71. See also Ben Bagdikian, *The Media Monopoly* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

[2] Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, "Poverty in the United States: 1992," *Current Population Reports, Consumer Income,* Series P60–185, pp. xi, xv.

[3] American households with incomes of less than $10,000 give an average of 5.5 percent of their earnings to charity or to a religious organization, while those making more than $100,000 a year give only 2.9 percent. After changes in the 1986 tax code reduced the benefits of charitable giving, taxpayers earning $500,000 or more slashed their average donation by nearly one-third. Furthermore, many of these acts of benevolence do not help the needy. Rather than provide funding to social service agencies that aid the poor, the voluntary contributions of the wealthy go to places and institutions that entertain, inspire, cure, or educate wealthy Americans—art museums, opera houses, theaters, orchestras, ballet companies, private hospitals, and elite universities. (Robert Reich, "Secession of the Successful," *New York Times Magazine,* February 17, 1991, p. 43.)

[4] William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Vintage, 1971).

[5] Benjamin DeMott, *The Imperial Middle* (New York: William Morrow, 1990), p. 123.

[6] Fred Barnes, "The Zillionaires Club," *The New Republic,* January 29, 1990, p. 24.

[7] Michael Parenti, *Inventing Reality* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), p. 109.

[8] *Time,* January 5, 1979, p. 10.

[9] Vincent Navarro, "The Middle Class—A Useful Myth," *The Nation,* March 23, 1992, p. 1.

[10] Charles Anderson, *The Political Economy of Social Class* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1974), p. 137. The number of private security guards in the United States now exceeds the number of public police officers. (Robert Reich, "Secession of the Successful," *New York Times Magazine,* February 17, 1991, p. 42.)

[11] William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), p. 5.

[12] Lee and Solomon, *Unreliable Sources,* p. 179.

[13] A total of $20 billion is spent on welfare when you include all state funding. But the average state funding also comes to only two cents per state dollar.

[14] *Newsweek,* August 10, 1992, p. 57.

[15] In 92 percent of the murders nationwide, the assailant and the victim are of the same race (46 percent are white/white, 46 percent are black/black), 5.6 percent are black on white, and 2.4 percent are white on black. (FBI and Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1985–1986, quoted in Raymond S. Franklin, *Shadows of Race and Class* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991], p. 108.)

[16] *Business Week,* June 8, 1992, p. 86.

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IT'S NOT THE MEDIA
The Truth about Pop Culture's Influence on Children

KAREN STERNHEIMER

One interesting area of research on the mass media is the effects media has on people, especially children. Karen Sternheimer, a sociologist at the University of Southern California, is particularly interested in how the media affects children. Her book *It's Not the Media: The Truth about Pop Culture's Influence on Children* (2003) is excerpted here. In this selection, Sternheimer addresses four fallacies of media violence and the effects it has on children.

April 20, 1999: I remember that Tuesday morning clearly. I was working at home, exhausted after teaching a Monday night class. When I turned on the television I knew that something horrible had happened because news programs had gone into crisis mode, with the "breaking news" banner underlining each station's coverage. There had been a shooting at a high school in Littleton, Colorado.

While the shooting at Columbine High School was discussed in context with other high-profile school shootings of the 1990s, it was clear that this one was different. The casualties were greater, the school larger and more affluent. Nonstop coverage ensued—I joined the news event as cameras were stationed at an off-site location where parents eagerly awaited the arrival of kids bused to safety. Parents hugged children, classmates held onto each other sobbing while telling reporters what it was like inside. As several students described crouching under tables in the library, I imagined myself in my own high school library, a place I went nearly every day after lunch for a little bit of quiet. I began to feel relieved that my high school days were long past. High school was hard enough without worrying about being shot.

Once the initial shock of the shootings ended, the commentators appeared to try to explain how something like this could happen. It didn't take long before pundits invoked the popular culture rationale. What music did the killers listen to? Why did they wear those trench coats? Wasn't the scene eerily reminiscent of the 1995 movie *The Basketball Diaries,* where Leonardo DiCaprio opens fire on his classmates and teacher and is met by the applause

of his buddies? Did they learn to make bombs on the Internet? They sure seemed to play lots of violent video games where they could take virtual target practice at their classmates. The commentary appeared to point to mounting evidence: the media were guilty, and the public has had enough. Columbine seemed to tell us that violent media could create tragedy, as we had long suspected.

[My research] is not about the Columbine High School shooting, but the incident serves as a powerful example of American anxieties about our media culture and our fear of what it may have "done to" children in the years leading up to and following the tragedy. Although the Columbine killers were in their teens, the word "child" is frequently used to encompass all minors to heighten the sense of young people's vulnerability to media culture. Throughout [my work] I try to be clear about which age group I'm talking about, but keep in mind that others aren't. My intent . . . is to take a step back and think about exactly why it is that we fear the effects of popular culture. As we will see, a great deal of our concern about media and media's potential effects on kids has more to do with uncertainty about the future and the changing landscape of childhood. In addition to considering why we are concerned about the impact of popular culture, I also explore why many researchers and politicians encourage us to remain afraid of media culture. . . .

Four Fallacies of Media-Violence Effects

. . . Historically, psychologists have focused the bulk of the research about media and violence on individual "effects" that have been used to draw conclusions on a sociological level. Adding sociological analysis gives us information about the larger context. We will see that from a sociological perspective media violence is important, but not in the way we tend to think it is. It cannot help us explain real violence well, but it can help us understand American culture and why stories of conflict and violent resolution so often reoccur.

Media violence has become a scapegoat, onto which we lay blame a host of social problems. Sociologist Todd Gitlin describes how "the indiscriminate fear of television in particular displaces justifiable fears of actual dangers—dangers of which television . . . provides some disturbing glimpses."[1] Concerns about media and violence rest on several flawed, yet taken-for-granted assumptions about both media and violence. These beliefs appear to be obvious in emotional arguments about "protecting" children. So while these are not the only problems with blaming media, this [reading] will address four central assumptions:

1. As media culture has expanded, children have become more violent.
2. Children are prone to imitate media violence with deadly results.
3. Real violence and media violence have the same meaning.
4. Research proves media violence is a major contributor to social problems.

As someone who has been accused of only challenging the media–violence connection because I am secretly funded by the entertainment industry (which I can assure you I am not), I can attest we are entering hostile and emotional territory.[2] This [reading] demonstrates where these assumptions come from and why they are misplaced.

Assumption #1: As Media Culture Has Expanded, Children Have Become More Violent

You won't get an argument from me on the first part of this assumption—media culture has expanded exponentially over the last few decades. The low cost of production of the microchip has made a wide variety of new media technologies like video games and computers available to a large number of consumers, and we have been buying billions of dollars worth of these products. Traditional media like television have expanded from a handful of channels to hundreds. Our involvement with media culture has grown to the degree that media use has become an integral part of everyday life. There is so much content out there that we cannot know about or control, so we can never be fully sure what children may come in contact with. This fear of the unknown underscores the anxiety about harmful effects. Is violent media imagery, a small portion of a vast media culture, poisoning the minds and affecting the behavior of countless children, as an August 2001 *Kansas City Star* article warns?[3] The fear seems real and echoes in newsprint across the country.

Perhaps an article in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* comes closest to mirroring popular sentiment and exposing three fears that are indicative of anxiety about change. Titled "Media, Single Parents Blamed for Spurt in Teen Violence," the article combines anxieties about shifts in family structure and the expansion of media culture with adults' fear of youth by falsely stating that kids are now more violent at earlier and earlier ages.[4] This certainly reflects a common perception, but its premise is fundamentally flawed: as media culture has expanded, young people have become *less* violent. During the 1990s arrest rates for violent offenses (like murder, rape, and aggravated assault) among fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds fell steadily, just as they did for people fourteen and under.[5] Those with the highest arrest rates now and in the past are adults. Fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds only outdo adults in burglary and theft, but these rates have been falling for the past twenty-five years. In fact, theft arrest rates for fifteen- to seventeen-year-olds have declined by 27 percent since 1976 and the rates for those fourteen and under have declined 41 percent, while the arrest rate for adults has increased.[6] Yet we seldom hear public outcry about the declining morals of adults—this complaint is reserved for youth. . . .

So why do we seem to think that kids are now more violent than ever? A Berkeley Media Studies Group report found that half of news stories about youth were about violence and that more than two-thirds of violence stories focused on youth.[7] We think kids are committing the lion's share of

violence because they comprise a large proportion of crime news. The reality is that adults commit most crime, but a much smaller percentage of these stories make news. The voices of reason that remind the public that youth crime decreased in the 1990s are often met with emotional anecdotes that draw attention away from dry statistics. A 2000 Discovery Channel "town meeting" called "Why Are We Violent" demonstrates this well. The program, described as a "wake-up call" for parents, warned that violence is everywhere, and their kids could be the next victims. Host Forrest Sawyer presented statistics indicating crime had dropped but downplayed them as only "part of the story." The bulk of the program relied on emotional accounts of experiences participants had with violence. There was no mention of violence committed by adults, the most likely perpetrators of violence against children. Kids serve as our scapegoat, blamed for threatening the rest of us, when, if anything, kids are more likely to be the victims of adult violence.

But how do we explain the young people who do commit violence? Can violent media help us here? Broad patterns of violence do not match media use as much as they mirror poverty rates. Take the city of Los Angeles, where I live, as an example. We see violent crime rates are higher in lower-income areas relative to the population. The most dramatic example is demonstrated by homicide patterns. For example, the Seventy-Seventh Street division (near the flashpoint of the 1992 civil unrest) reported 12 percent of the city's homicides in 1999, yet comprised less than 5 percent of the city's total population. Conversely, the West Los Angeles area (which includes affluent neighborhoods such as Brentwood and Bel-Air) reported less than 1 percent of the city's homicides but accounted for nearly 6 percent of the total population. If media culture were a major indicator, wouldn't the children of the wealthy, who have greater access to the Internet, video games, and other visual media, be at greater risk for becoming violent? The numbers don't bear out because violence patterns do not match media use.

Violence can be linked with a variety of issues, the most important one being poverty. Criminologist E. Britt Patterson examined dozens of studies of crime and poverty and found that communities with extreme poverty, a sense of bleakness, and neighborhood disorganization and disintegration were most likely to support higher levels of violence.[8] Violence may be an act committed by an individual, but violence is also a sociological, not just an individual, phenomenon. To fear media violence we would have to believe that violence has its origins mostly in individual psychological functioning and thus that any kid could snap from playing too many video games. Ongoing sociological research has identified other risk factors that are based on environment: poverty, substance use, overly authoritarian or lax parenting, delinquent peers, neighborhood violence, and weak ties to one's family or community.[9] If we are really interested in confronting youth violence, these are the issues that must be addressed first. Media violence is something worth looking at, but not the primary cause of actual violence.

What about the kids who aren't from poor neighborhoods and who come from supportive environments? When middle-class white youths commit acts of violence, we seem to be at a loss for explanations beyond media violence. These young people often live in safe communities, enjoy many material privileges, and attend well-funded schools. Opportunities are plentiful. What else could it be, if not media?

For starters, incidents in these communities are rare but extremely well publicized. These stories are dramatic and emotional and thus great ratings-boosters. School shootings or mere threats of school shootings are often not just local stories but make national news. Public concern about violence swells when suburban white kids are involved. Violence is not "supposed" to happen there. Central-city violence doesn't raise nearly the same attention or public outcry to ban violent media. We seem to come up empty when looking for explanations of why affluent young white boys, for example, would plot to blow up their school. We rarely look beyond the media for our explanations, but the social contexts are important here too. Even well-funded suburban schools can become overgrown, impersonal institutions where young people easily fall through the cracks and feel alienated. Sociologists Wayne Wooden and Randy Blazak suggest that the banality and boredom of suburban life can create overarching feelings of meaninglessness within young people, that perhaps they find their parents' struggles to obtain material wealth empty and are not motivated by the desire for money enough to conform.[10] It is too risky to criticize the American Dream—the house in the suburbs, homogeneity, a Starbucks at every corner—because ultimately that requires many of us to look in the mirror. It is easier to look at the TV for the answer.

The truth is there is no epidemic of white suburban violence, but isolated and tragic examples have gained a lot of attention. Between 1980 and 1999 the homicide arrest rate for whites aged ten to seventeen fell 41 percent.[11] In 1999 there was 1.1 arrest for every 100,000 white kids—hardly an epidemic. Fearing media enables adults to condemn youth culture and erroneously blame young people for crimes they don't commit.

Assumption #2: Children Are Prone to Imitate Media Violence with Deadly Results

Blaming a perceived crime wave on media seems reasonable when we read examples in the news about eerie parallels between a real-life crime and entertainment. *Natural Born Killers, The Basketball Diaries, South Park,* and *Jerry Springer* have all been blamed for inspiring violence.[12] Reporting on similarities from these movies does make for a dramatic story and good ratings, but too often journalists do not dig deep enough to tell us the context of the incident. By leaving out the non-media details, news reports make it is easy for us to believe that the movies made them do it. . . .

. . . Let's consider cases that [involved actual violence], which on the surface seem to be proof that some kids are copycat killers. In the summer of

1999, a twelve-year-old boy named Lionel Tate beat and killed six-year-old Tiffany Eunick, the daughter of a family friend in Pembroke Pines, Florida. Claiming he was imitating wrestling moves he had seen on television, Lionel's defense attorney attempted to prove that Lionel did not know what he was doing would hurt Tiffany. He argued that Lionel should not be held criminally responsible for what he called a tragic accident. The jury didn't buy this defense, finding that the severity of the girl's injuries was inconsistent with the wrestling claim. Nonetheless, the news media ran with the wrestling alibi. Headlines shouted "Wrestle Slay-Boy Faces Life," "Boy, 14, Gets Life in TV Wrestling Death," and "Young Killer Wrestles Again in Broward Jail."[13] This case served to reawaken fears that media violence, particularly as seen in wrestling, is dangerous because kids allegedly don't understand that real violence can cause real injuries. Cases like this one are used to justify claims that kids may imitate media violence without recognizing the real consequences.

Lionel's defense attorney capitalized on this fear by stating that "Lionel had fallen into the trap so many youngsters fall into."[14] But many youngsters don't fall into this "trap" and neither did Lionel. Lionel Tate was not an average twelve-year-old boy; the warning signs were certainly present before that fateful summer evening. Most news reports focused on the alleged wrestling connection without exploring Lionel's troubled background. He was described by a former teacher as "almost out of control," prone to acting out, disruptive, and seeking attention.[15]

Evidence from the case also belies the claim that Lionel and Tiffany were just playing, particularly the more than thirty-five serious injuries that Tiffany sustained, including a fractured skull and massive internal damage. These injuries were not found to be consistent with play wrestling as the defense claimed. The prosecutor pointed out that Lionel did not tell investigators he was imitating wrestling moves initially; instead, he said they were playing tag but changed his story to wrestling weeks later. Although his defense attorney claimed Lionel didn't realize someone could really get hurt while wrestling, Lionel admitted that he knew television wrestling was "fake."[16]

This story would probably not have made national news if Lionel's lawyers had not invoked the wrestling defense, but the publicity surrounding the case ultimately reveals a double tragedy: Tiffany's death and Lionel's trial as an "adult" and subsequent sentence of life in prison. We as a society promote the idea that children are too naïve to know the difference between media violence and real violence, but we are also quick to apply adult punishment. Completely lost in the discussion surrounding this case is our repeated failure as a society to treat children like Lionel *before* violent behavior escalates, to recognize the warning signs before it is too late.

The imitation hypothesis suggests that violence in media puts kids like Lionel over the edge, the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back, but this enables us to divert our attention from the seriousness of other risk factors. . . .

The biggest problem with the imitation hypothesis is that it suggests that we focus on media instead of the other 99 percent of the pieces of the violence puzzle. When a lack of other evidence is provided in news accounts, it appears as though media violence is the most compelling explanatory factor. It is certainly likely that young people who are prone to become violent are also drawn toward violent entertainment, just as funny kids may be drawn to comedies. But children whose actions parallel media violence come with a host of other more important risk factors. We blame media violence to deflect blame away from adult failings—not simply the failure of parents but our society's failure to create effective programs and solutions to help troubled young people.

Assumption #3: Real Violence and Media Violence Have the Same Meaning

. . . It is a mistake to presume media representations of violence and real violence have the same meaning for audiences. Consider the following three scenarios:

1. Wile E. Coyote drops an anvil on Road Runner's head, who keeps on running;
2. A body is found on *Law and Order* (or your favorite police show);
3. A shooting at a party leaves one person dead and another near death after waiting thirty minutes for an ambulance.

Are all three situations examples of violence? Unlike the first two incidents, the third was real. All three incidents have vastly different contexts, and thus different meanings. The first two are fantasies in which no real injuries occurred, yet are more likely to be the subject of public concerns about violence. Ironically, because the third incident received no media attention, its details, and those of incidents like it, are all but ignored in discussions of violence. Also ignored is the context in which the real shooting occurred; it was sparked by gang rivalries which stem from neighborhood tensions, poverty, lack of opportunity, and racial inequality. The fear of media violence is founded on the assumption that young people do not recognize a difference between media violence and real violence. Ironically, adults themselves seem to have problems distinguishing between the two.

Media violence is frequently conflated with actual violence in public discourse, as one is used to explain the other. It is adults who seem to confuse the two. For instance, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported on a local school district that created a program to deal with bullying.[17] Yet media violence was a prominent part of the article, which failed to take into account the factors that create bullying situations in schools. Adults seem to have difficulty separating media representations from actual physical harm. Media violence is described as analogous to tobacco, a "smoking gun" endangering children.[18] This is probably because many middle-class white adults who

fear media have had little exposure to violence other than through media representations.

I discovered the difference a few years ago as a researcher studying juvenile homicides. We combed through police investigation files looking for details about the incidents while carefully avoiding crime scene and coroner's photographs to avoid becoming emotionally overwhelmed. One morning while looking through a case file the book accidentally fell open to the page with the crime scene photos. I saw a young man slumped over the steering wheel of his car. He had a gunshot wound to his forehead, a small red circle. His eyes were open. I felt a wrenching feeling in my stomach, a feeling I have never felt before and have fortunately never felt since. At that point I realized that regardless of the hundreds, if not thousands, of violent acts I had seen in movies and television, none could come close to this. I had never seen the horrific simplicity of a wound like that one, never seen the true absence of expression in a person's face. No actor has ever been able to truly "do death" right, I realized. It became clear that I knew nothing about violence, thankfully. Yes, I have read the research, but that knowledge was just academic; this was real.

This is not to say that violent media do not create real emotional responses. Good storytelling can create sadness and fear, and depending on the context violence can even be humorous (as in *The Three Stooges*). Media violence may elicit no emotional response—but this does not necessarily mean someone is "desensitized" or uncaring. It may mean that a script was mediocre and that the audience doesn't care about its characters. But it could be because media violence is not real and most of us, even children, know it. Sociologist Todd Gitlin calls media violence a way of getting "safe thrills."[19] Viewing media violence is a way of dealing with the most frightening aspect of life in a safe setting, like riding a roller-coaster while knowing that you will get out and walk away in a few minutes.

Nonetheless, many people, fueled by media reports of studies that seem to be very compelling, fear that kids can't really distinguish between real violence and media violence. An unpublished study of eight children made news across the United States and Canada. "Kids may say they know the difference between real violence and the kind they see on television and video, but new research shows their brains don't," announced Montreal's *Gazette*.[20] This research, conducted by John Murray, a developmental psychologist at Kansas State University, involved MRIs of eight children, aged eight to thirteen. As the kids watched an eighteen-minute fight scene from *Rocky IV*, their brains showed activity in areas that are commonly activated in response to threats and emotional arousal. This should come as no surprise, since entertainment often elicits emotional response; if film and television had no emotional payoff, why would people watch?

But the press took this small study as proof of what we already think we know: that kids can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. A *Kansas City Star* reporter described this as "a frightening new insight," and the study's author stated the children "were treating *Rocky IV* violence as real violence."[21] And while Yale psychologist Dorothy Singer warned that the size of the study

was too small to draw any solid conclusions, she also said that the study is "very important."[22]

If a small study challenged the conventional media violence wisdom, you can bet that it would have been roundly dismissed as anecdotal. But instead, this study was treated as another piece to the puzzle, and clearly made the news because of its dramatic elements: a popular movie, medical technology, and children viewing violence. In any case, there are big problems with the interpretation offered by the study's author. First, this study actually discredits the idea of desensitization. The children's brains clearly showed some sort of emotional reaction to the violence they saw. They were not "emotionally deadened," as we are often told to fear. But kids can't win either way within the media-violence fear, since feeling "too little" or "too much" are both interpreted as proof that media violence is harmful to children.

Second, by insisting that children are completely different from adults we ignore the likelihood that adult brains would likely react in much the same way. Yet somehow by virtue of children being children, their *brains* can know things that *they* don't. Do an MRI on adults while they watch pornography and their brains will probably show arousal. Does that mean the person would think that he or she just had *actual* sex? The neurological reaction would probably be extremely similar, if not identical, but we can't read brain waves and infer meaning. That's what makes humans human: the ability to create meaning from our experiences. And adults are not the only ones capable of making sense of their lives.

Professor Murray's comments imply that researchers can "read" children's minds and find things that the kids themselves cannot, a rather troubling presumption. Violence has meanings that cannot simply be measured in brain waves, MRIs, or CAT scans. No matter what these high-tech tools may tell researchers, experiencing real violence is fundamentally different from experiencing media violence. It is adults, not kids, who seem to have trouble grasping this idea. Somehow lost in the fear of media violence is an understanding of how actual violence is experienced. . . .

Violence exists within specific social contexts; people make meaning of both real violence and media violence in the context of their lives. It is clear . . . that neighborhood violence and poverty are important factors necessary to understand the meanings these young people give to media violence. Other contexts would certainly be different, but focusing on media violence means real-life circumstances are often overlooked.

Watching media violence is obviously different from experiencing actual violence, yet public discourse has somehow melded the two together. Clearly media violence can be interpreted in many ways: as frightening, as cathartic, as funny, or absurd. We can't make assumptions about meaning no matter what the age of the audience.

We also need to acknowledge the meaning of violence in American media and American culture. It's too easy to say that media only reflect society or that producers are just giving the public what it wants, but certainly to some extent this is true. Violence is dramatic, a simple cinematic tool and

easy to sell to domestic and overseas markets, since action-adventure movies present few translation problems for overseas distributors. But in truth, violence and aggression are very central facets of American society. Aggressive personalities tend to thrive in capitalism: risk-takers, people who are not afraid to "go for it," are highly prized within business culture. We celebrate sports heroes for being aggressive, not passive. The best hits of the day make the football highlights on ESPN, and winning means "decimating" and "destroying" in broadcast lingo.

We also value violence, or its softer-sounding equivalent, "the use of force," to resolve conflict. On local, national, and international levels violence is largely considered acceptable. Whether this is right or wrong is the subject for [another discussion], but the truth is that in the United States the social order has traditionally been created and maintained through violence. We can't honestly address media violence until we recognize that, in part, our media culture is violent because as a society we are.

Assumption #4: Research Conclusively Demonstrates the Link between Media and Violent Behavior

We engage in collective denial when we continually focus on the media as main sources of American violence. The frequency of news reports of research that allegedly demonstrates this connection helps us ignore the real social problems in the United States. Headlines imply that researchers have indeed found a preponderance of evidence to legitimate focus on media violence. Consider these headlines:

"Survey Connects Graphic TV Fare, Child Behavior" (*Boston Globe*)
"Cutting Back on Kids' TV Use May Reduce Aggressive Acts" (*Denver Post*)
"Doctors Link Kids' Violence to Media" (*Arizona Republic*)
"Study Ties Aggression to Violence in Games" (*USA Today*)

The media violence connection seems very real, with studies and experts to verify the alleged danger in story after story. Too often studies reported in the popular press provide no critical scrutiny and fail to challenge conceptual problems. In our sound-bite society, news tends to contain very little analysis or criticism of any kind.

The *Los Angeles Times* ran a story called "In a Wired World, TV Still Has Grip on Kids.[23] The article provided the reader the impression that research provided overwhelming evidence of negative media effects: only three sentences out of a thousand-plus words offered any refuting information. Just two quoted experts argued against the conventional wisdom, while six offered favorable comments. Several studies' claims drew no challenge, in spite of serious shortcomings.

For example, researchers considered responses to a "hostility questionnaire" or children's "aggressive" play as evidence that media violence can lead to real-life violence. But aggression is not the same as violence, although in some cases it may be a precursor to violence. Nor it is clear that these

"effects" are anything but immediate. We know that aggression in itself is not necessarily a pathological condition; in fact, we all have aggression that we need to learn to deal with. Second, several of the studies use correlation statistics as proof of causation. Correlation indicates the existence of relationships, but cannot measure cause and effect. Reporters may not recognize this, but have the responsibility to present the ideas of those who question such claims.

This pattern repeats in story after story. A *Denver Post* article described a 1999 study that claimed that limiting TV and video use reduced children's aggression.[24] The story prefaced the report by stating that "numerous studies have indicated a connection between exposure to violence and aggressive behavior in children," thus making this new report appear part of a large body of convincing evidence. The only "challenge" to this study came from psychologist James Garbarino, who noted that the real causes of violence are complex, although his list of factors began with "television, video games, and movies." He did cite guns, child abuse, and economic inequality as important factors, but the story failed to address any of these other problems.

The reporter doesn't mention the study's other shortcomings. First is the assumption that the television and videos kids watch contain violence at all. The statement we hear all the time in various forms—"the typical American child will be exposed to 200,000 acts of violence on television by age eighteen"—is based on the estimated time kids spend watching television, but tells us nothing about what they have actually watched.[25] Second, in these studies, aggression in play serves as a proxy for violence. But there is a big difference between playing "aggressively" and committing acts of violence. Author Gerard Jones points out that play is a powerful way by which kids can deal with feelings of fear.[26] Thus, watching the Power Rangers and then play-fighting is not necessarily an indicator of violence; it is part of how children fantasize about being powerful without ever intending to harm anyone. Finally, the researchers presumed that reducing television and video use explained changes in behavior, when in fact aggression and violence are complex responses to specific circumstances created by a variety of environmental factors. Nonetheless, the study's author stated that "if you . . . reduce their exposure to media you'll see a reduction in aggressive behavior."

A spring 2003 study claiming to have long-term evidence that children who watch television violence become violent adults even made news the week that American troops entered Iraq. This study is unique in that it tracked 329 respondents for fifteen years, but it contains several serious shortcomings that prevent us from concluding that television creates violence later in life.[27] First, the study measures aggression, not violence. Aggression is broadly defined by researchers, who constructed an "aggression composite" that includes such antisocial behavior as having angry thoughts, talking rudely to or about others, and having moving violations on one's driving record. Violence is a big jump from getting lots of speeding tickets. But beyond this composite, the connection between television viewing and physical aggression for males, perhaps the most interesting measure, is relatively

weak. Television viewing explains only 3 percent of what led to physical aggression in the men studied.[28] Although some subjects did report getting into physical altercations, fewer than 10 of the 329 participants had ever been convicted of a crime, too small of a sample to make any predictions about serious violent offenders.

By focusing so heavily on media violence, both researchers and news accounts divert attention from the factors we know to be associated with violence. Both also downplay the serious limitations of traditional media-effects research. A *Boston Globe* article conceded that a great deal of "evidence" is anecdotal, stating that "the real link between televised sex and violence and actual behavior has been difficult to prove," but only after seven paragraphs about the "growing concern of mental health specialists."[29] In spite of news reports about the "tremendous problem" of media violence allegedly demonstrated by "classic studies" and "sweeping new" research, as the *Boston Globe* and *Los Angeles Times* reported, this body of research contains leaps in logic, questionable methods, and exaggerated findings.[30]

There is a preponderance of evidence, but not the result of "thirty years of research and more than 1000 studies," as the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* described, but the fact that Americans spend so much time, energy, and money researching this loaded question instead of researching violence itself.[31] If youth violence is really the issue of importance here, we should start by studying violence, before studying media. But media culture is on trial, not violence. These studies are smoke screens that enable us to continue along the media trail while disregarding actual violence patterns. . . .

Whenever critics challenge the results of media-effects research authors tend to respond with arrogance, hostility, and occasionally personal insults. The spirit of debate is all but absent. Within the scientific method, researchers are supposed to continually consider the possibility that they are wrong. But within this field dissenters are not just researchers with different findings; they are regarded as heretics. If this is indeed an open-and-shut question, as its proponents argue, why do media-effects researchers get so nasty with their critics?

Perhaps science itself is in question—good science is supposed to encourage, not suppress, debate. Ideally the scientific community shares ideas not to intimidate dissent or boost egos, but to improve scholarship. Instead, media-violence research has created a sort of intellectual totalitarianism, where researchers only listen to people who agree with them.

The media-violence story, the research, and its emotional baggage make open debate next to impossible. Those who fear media violence police the boundaries of this dogma to avoid challenging their intuitive belief that popular culture is dangerous. But taste and influence are two very different things: media researchers are often media critics in disguise. There's nothing wrong with media criticism—we could probably use more of it—but when media criticism takes the place of understanding the roots of violence, we have a problem. Dissent is dismissed as Hollywood propaganda, reinforced when the press quotes a studio executive to "balance" a story on media's alleged danger.

Media violence enables American discussion about violence to avoid the tough questions about actual violence: Why is it so closely associated with poverty? How can we provide families with resources to cope in violent communities? By focusing so much energy on media violence, we avoid our responsibility to pressure politicians to create policies that address these difficult issues. To hear that "Washington (is) again taking on Hollywood" may feel good to the public and make it appear as though lawmakers are onto something, but real violence remains off the agenda.[32] This tactic appeals to many middle-class constituents whose experience with violence is often limited. Economically disadvantaged people are most likely to experience real violence, but least likely to appear on politicians' radar. A national focus on media rather than real violence draws on existing fears and reinforces the view that popular culture, not public policy, leads to violence.

Violence in media reminds us that we cannot control what children know about. But unfortunately many children are exposed to real violence, not only in their communities, but sometimes in their own homes. We should not deny this and use the illusion of childhood (as always carefree until the media gets to them) to shield ourselves from this reality. The concern about media and violence is not just a fear for children, but a fear *of* children. We often deal with this fear by calling for stricter controls of other people's children, both by the state and by parents. These "solutions" fail to address the real problems.

ENDNOTES

[1] Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001), p. 145.

[2] After publishing an op-ed (Karen Sternheimer, "Blaming Television and Movies Is Easy and Wrong," *Los Angeles Times*, February 4, 2001, p. M5), I received e-mails that presumed that my work must be funded by the entertainment industry, which it is not.

[3] Jim Sullinger, "Forum Examines Media Violence," *Kansas City Star*, August 26, 2001, p. B5.

[4] Jennifer Blanton, "Media, Single Parents Blamed for Spurt in Teen Violence," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, August 2, 2001, p. A1.

[5] Federal Bureau of Investigation, Violence Index, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1999* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

[6] Federal Bureau of Investigation, Property Index, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1999* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

[7] Lori Dorfman et al., "Youth and Violence on Local Television News in California," *American Journal of Public Health* 87 (1997): 1311–16.

[8] E. Britt Patterson, "Poverty, Income Inequality and Community Crime Rates," in *Juvenile Delinquency: Historical, Theoretical and Societal Reactions to Youth*, 2d ed., edited by Paul M. Sharp and Barry W. Hancock (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), pp. 135–50.

[9] Rosie Mestel, "Triggers of Violence Still Elusive," *Los Angeles Times*, March 7, 2001, p. A1.

[10] Wayne Wooden and Randy Blazak, *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws: From Youth Culture to Delinquency*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2001).

[11] Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States, 1980–1999* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, 2000).

[12] Mediascope, "Copycat Crimes," http://www.mediascope.org/pubs/ibriefs/cc.htm.

[13] Caroline J. Keough, "Young Killer Wrestles Again in Broward Jail," *Miami Herald*, February 17, 2001, p. A1. Michael Browning et al., "Boy, 14, Gets Life in TV Wrestling Death," *Chicago*