Artigos especiais

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Violent images in the media and its impact on children

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Abstract: The article studies the impact of media-shown violence on children and youth. It examines the relation between exposure to massive absorption of violent images and aggressive behavior. It also concludes it would be hard to fins unequivocal relationship between violent behavior and exposure to violence in the media for various different reasons. Consideration must be given to characteristics of young viewers and the specific vulnerabilities attached to age groups, discussing in detail the problem of pornography. The article, nevertheless, supports the banning of racist, xenophobic, sexist and paedophiliac programs in broadcasting and the Internet as well as the inclusion of media education in school curricula to favor the development of critical attitude towards the material children and youth are being exposed to.

Key words: Ethics. Media. Violence. Children. Behavior. Education.

Resumo: O artigo discute o impacto da violência na mídia sobre as crianças e jovens. Examina a relação entre a exposição massiva e a introjeção de imagens violentas e o comportamento agressivo. Também conclui que é difícil definir a relação inequívoca entre comportamentos violentos e exposição à imagens violentas na mídia por várias razões diferentes. Considerando as características dos jovens expectadores e suas vulnerabilidades específicas, determinadas pela faixa etária, é discutido em detalhes o problema da pornografia. Além disso, o artigo defende o banimento de programas racistas, xenofóbicos, sexistas e pedófilos na programação das emissoras e na Internet bem como a inclusão da educação à distância no currículo escolar como um fator de desenvolvimento de atitudes críticas voltadas os programas e imagens aos quais crianças e jovens estão expostos.

Palavras chave: Ética. Mídia.Violência.Criança. Comportamento. Educação.

The subject of children and manifestations of violence has attracted the attention of national, regional and international institutions for several years. Many countries, particularly the industrialized nations, have created professional and academic bodies capable of conducting independent studies in this field. The Council of Europe adopted an integrated project on "Reponses to daily violence in a democratic society" and the French National Commission for UNESCO, in collaboration with the Council of Europe, held an International Seminar in Strasbourg on November 29 and 30 2004 on "Children and violence".[1] In 1997, UNESCO set up an International Centre for Information and Documentation on Children and Violence on the Screen.[2] This gives some idea of how concerned national authorities and the international community are with regard to this issue.

My presentation will focus on the theme of manifestations of violence and the media. I specify manifestations of violence, therefore the plural, as what is involved is violence in various manifestations which have an effect in various ways. To tackle this subject, the approach I have adopted is to deal with violence in the media – more particularly the media aimed at young people – and the impact of the media on the various forms of violence displayed by children and adolescents. A very abundant literature has developed around this issue over the last 30 years. While psychologists and paedopsychiatrists began to take an interest in it as early as the 1950s, it was rather later that anthropologists, sociologists and philosophers followed in their footsteps. More recently, specialists in social communication and semiologists have contributed extensively to nurturing this debate which remains open, thereby eliciting as many relevant questions as it leads to very little certitude. In fact, while various analyses converge on certain aspects, substantial divergences subsist on others. I shall endeavour to highlight the former without overlooking the later, due essentially to cultural differences.

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[1] For further information see site www.unesco.org/comnat/france.

[2] The Centre has since changed its name and is now entitled "UNESCO International Clearing House on Children, Youth and Media". It has integrated the "Nordic Information Centre for Media and Communication" of Göteborg University, Sweden. See its site www.nordicom.gu.se.

The term "media" is to be taken here in its broadest sense, namely that of the organs and channels of information, communication and expression. Without claiming to be comprehensive, I shall try to encompass the cinema and television, video games and, last but not least, the Net. It must be recalled, first and foremost, that this presentation will lay emphasis on the negative aspects of these media. That does not mean that we should overlook the fact that these media also play a positive role. To quote but a few examples, television is a fundamental factor in the socialization of young people; its function includes the dissemination of scientific culture, knowledge of the universe, the planet and other cultures, if it is used judiciously; the cinema is an artistic medium which opens up unprecedented prospects of creativity; the Net promotes "a knowledge society" and affords access to self-induced training.

Facts and figures

A number of figures provide a glimpse of the extent of the phenomenon. According to a study conducted by the American Psychiatric Association, young Americans, at the age of 18, will, on average, have seen on television some 16,000 murders and 200,000 acts of violence. They will have watched television between 25 and 28 hours per week and will have spent seven hours playing with video games.[3] They will therefore have spent more than twice as much time in front of a screen than at school. In France, young people spend 1,450 hours per year on average in front of screens, while they spend 850 hours per year facing their teachers and … 52 hours in the company of their parents.[4] The fact is that, during those 1,450 hours, they have been exposed on average to 13,000 violent scenes, that is to say seven violent scenes per hour. It is estimated that violent images are to be found in almost 60% on average of fictional productions in Europe (1). Very few studies have actually been conducted on the effects of the representation of violence in video games and on the Net because of

[3] American Psychiatric Association, 1998.
[4] Data provided for 2002 by the French "Union nationale des Associations familiales (UNAF)".

the stunning rapidity with which these technologies evolve. There is every reason to think that in certain cases video games and/or the Net have taken over from television and the cinema (2).[5] To provide but a glimpse of the importance of music in the daily life of young people and their education today – without this issue being in any way linked to violence – it is also noteworthy that American adolescents, aged 13 to 18, will have listened to 10,500 hours of music, slightly less than twice the time they will have spent in the classroom during those six years.[6]

These figures are by in-large similar to the findings of an international survey carried out in 1996-1997 by Prof. Jo Groebel of Utrecht University, on behalf of UNESCO and the World Organization of the Scout Movement.[7] The relevance of this publication, apart from its unique international scope, lays in the most revealing geo-cultural and historical differences. Substantial differences appear from one culture to another but also from high-crime environment to low-aggression neighbourhoods.

Overview of the research

Although concern has grown only recently, the phenomenon had already attracted the attention of the public authorities and scientists some 50 years ago. In fact, several studies were conducted in the mid-1950s by Wilbur Schramm and his colleagues in the United States of America and by Hilde Himmelweit and her colleagues in the United Kingdom. The conclusions of these studies were very cautious, particularly in comparison with subsequent research. They

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[5] Statement by Dr Robert E. McAfee, past President of the American Medical Association, before the Sub-Committee on Telecommunications and Finance of the Energy and Trade Committee of the House of Representatives, June 1994.

[6] Parents Music Resource Center, in Entertainment Monitor, 1995. The Groebel Report indicates that pop stars and musicians serve as role models for 18.5% of the 12 year-old age group surveyed.

[7] The survey was carried out on the basis of a 60-item questionnaire answered by more than 5,000 12 year-old pupils from the following 23 countries: Angola, Argentina, Armenia, Brazil, Canada, Costa Rica, Croatia, Egypt, Fiji, Germany, India, Japan, Mauritius, The Netherlands, Peru, Philippines, Qatar, South Africa, Spain, Tajikistan, Togo, Trinidad & Tobago and Ukraine.

reveal a degree of correlation between violence on the screen and aggressive behaviour among young people, but they lay emphasis on a whole series of essential parameters such as the fragility of certain subjects, and the duration and frequency of viewing violent scenes, etc. In the 1960s, Albert Bandura and Leonard Berkowitz were to continue these studies in the United States of America through experiments with children of preschool age and concluded that there was truly a causal relationship between a "massive absorption" of violent images and a tendency towards aggressive behaviour. Some researchers, however, consider such conclusions as abusive and raise the question of knowing if it is not because these young people have a propensity for violence that they seek to watch repeatedly images which satisfy such desires. Those who hold that opinion consider that it is the symptom which is taken to be a cause, that is to say, that the children who are predisposed to aggressive behaviour frequently seek out violent images and it is not the fact that they watch them that necessarily makes them aggressive. In fact, the research in question widely applies the behaviourist model, laying emphasis on short-term behaviour. It has since been complemented by longitudinal studies, that is to say, surveys that have monitored groups of young people over several years. These surveys have been carried out in particular by the American Association of Pediatrics. The latter, in a General Policy Statement, has asserted that there is "a causal relationship between violence watched on the media and the aggressive behaviour of some children"(3). The Statement under consideration specifies that the more violence is represented in a real-life context, the greater will be its integration within the process of apprenticeship of violence by a young individual.

Since then, research on the same subject has been conducted in many countries, not only in Europe, as in Denmark, Finland, Germany, Italy, New Zealand (4), Norway, Slovenia,[8] and Sweden, but also in Argentina, Canada, India,[9] Israel and some countries of North Africa (5; 6). In Israel, a comparative study on violence among

[8] Study by Dragan Petrovic.
[9] Study by Kanti Kumar.

11

children led to the conclusion that children in rural areas were less violent than those in urban ones and the explanation provided was that the former watched less television than the latter. The merit of a very comprehensive Canadian study was that it gave a more subtle analysis and refrained from making any sweeping affirmations (7). The United Kingdom has published many studies and conducts opinion polls on various aspects of the matter. Last but not least, mention must be made, as far as France is concerned, of the very comprehensive report produced by the Kriegel Commission on Violence on television (8) submitted to the French Minister of Culture in 2002.

Conclusions drawn from the research

What conclusions can be brought to light from this corpus of research and analyses? We can see several conclusions like that. There is no unequivocal causal relationship between violent behaviour and exposure to violence in the media

The first conclusion is that it is difficult to establish an unequivocal causal relationship in this particular field, i.e. a one-to-one relation between violent behaviour and exposure to violence in the media. For some 20 years, on subjects that are so complex, research has focused on the causal relationships with a cluster of factors.

Firstly, television, the cinema and television news should be put back into a social, cultural and historical context and the frequency of violent images should be assessed in the fabric it weaves with the rest of life in the community. This has been stressed in the Groebel Report since it highlights different reactions to media contents depending on socio-cultural criteria, in particular as to the perception of violence among children who have lived through civil wars. How can we dissociate scenes of violence from the surrounding violence in which we are captive ourselves? The news which adults watch on television and which children are not spared, provides a constant tale of violence and, more especially, through incidental news items, a kind of locally based violence which is made all the more banal by the fact that it is viewed directly and at first hand. It would hardly seem legitimate to reproach the media for this whose task is, after all, to keep the public informed.

Nevertheless, we can all remember those disturbing pictures of an eight-year-old girl dying before our eyes after having been carried away by a mudslide in Colombia or those of a man drowning in the floods in Florida. Since then, the media have voluntarily given up the broadcasting of images of executions or of people who are dying. Such images make violence a banality and end up by making it less real, particularly among young viewers. This deterioration of reality in the eyes of young viewers has an effect on the value of human life. The phenomenon of the loss of sensitivity tends to raise the thresholds of tolerance of violence in a young audience, which may well lead companies that produce audiovisual products, televised programmes and video games to intensify the degree of violence depicted.

Secondly, importance must imperatively be laid on the social and personal characteristics of young viewers as we must not overlook the fact that the personal history of the subject and his or her quest for identity play a role that is far from negligible. Consequently, for most of the time, we think of the impact of violent themes on the development of future aggressors, but we must not forget that these same themes can nurture among some young viewers a feeling of identification with the victim. Another rarely mentioned factor is that of the choice of television programmes made by the parents of young viewers. What do they themselves actually watch? How do they influence their children's assiduous viewing? A survey conducted in the United Kingdom in 2004 among adults[10] has revealed that the majority of men who were questioned were not hostile to violence on the screen. Paradoxically, it should be emphasized that half of these men who make up the majority recognized having been themselves victims of violence. Conversely, a majority of women expressed concern at the impact that violence on the screen could have on children.

The age-group factor is paramount to the causal relationship between violent behaviour and exposure to violence in the media.

The second conclusion is that a distinction must be made between age groups. For the group aged 3 to 5 years, care must be taken to monitor the time spent watching television and the proportion of

[10] Broadcasting Standards Commission, 2004.

13

time devoted to recreational or other activities. That a child should be attracted by conflictual situations should not warrant undue concern. Bruno Bettelheim showed how cruelty plays a part in tales for children. Children thereby become aware that it is not forbidden to have negative feelings for others, which consequently rids them of guilt.

The most vulnerable period for children is that between 6 and 12 years. It is at that age that the routine of daily life is established with periods for watching television programmes, horror films, playing with video games, and surfing on the Net. During that period, habits are acquired and specific tastes are confirmed. As with cruelty, we should not worry about the taste which some children have in those years for horror films, as they attempt to overcome their own fears. A specific fear related to a particular object is less frightening than fear of fear.

Boys at that age are particularly fascinated by the power of the heroes with whom they identify. What do they actually see? That the narrative threads of the programme or video game, albeit very mediocre, is Manichean, whereby on one side there is good while on the other there is evil. Similarly, their heroes attempt to solve any predicament through confrontation and violence, even a fight to death! In the narrative pattern, girls or women are relegated to a justificatory role in which they are condemned to a passive role or even to being the symbol of a trophy.[11] It is at this particular age that parents should display the greatest vigilance, assuming they are aware of what their children are watching.

As regards the public authorities, the *Kriegel Report* suggests banning violent or pornographic programmes between 7:00 a.m. and 10:30 p.m. Following a survey conducted in 2003, the Independent Commission for Television in the United Kingdom proposed a watershed for broadcasting programmes for adults until 9:00 p.m. It believed that special attention should be given to programmes

[11] The Groebel Report highlights major gender and regional differences. 30% of boys of the 12 year-old age group mention action heroes as role models compared to 21% of girls. 34% of Asian rank action heroes highest as compared to 25% of Europeans and Canadians and 18% of Africans lowest.

broadcast between 6:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.

Apart from violent, sexist programmes, the 13 to 18 year-old age group raises the specific problem of pornography on the screen, whether it be films, videos or sites on the Net. Most adolescents in the developed countries aged 13 to 15 have watched a pornographic film either alone or in a group on television or on the Net. Pornographic sequences display a degrading image of women. While they may nurture a feeling of humiliation and inferiority in a female adolescent, they tend to generate in her male counterpart fantasies and social stereotypes that are all the more fearsome as he considers them as to being "natural facts of life". According to the most common of these, men are dominating by nature and women are disposable objects.

This depreciated image of women and other stereotypes are reinforced by the television series which adolescents frequently watch at that age and which depict situations that are realistic without necessarily being real. Those who produce such programmes rely on marketing studies to devise the various episodes. They create situations in which the characters are stereotyped with sexual roles that they believe are determined once and for all: men are strong, women are futile; men are rational, women are impulsive etc. They acknowledge the fact that they insert events such as murders, trials, drug trafficking, prostitution, teenage pregnancy etc. when the series begins to flag or when the audience is tending to decline. They maintain that such series may be of pedagogical value without necessarily being didactic. For example, when these series deal with domestic violence, they show how disastrous the consequences may be for the couple, the family or their entourage.

Nonetheless, this argument does not take account of two factors. Firstly, in the example referred to, young people keep in mind the scenes of family violence without other events being perceived as their consequences but as other violent events. Furthermore, the depreciated image of women as portrayed by these television series lends support to scenes of violence against women. In reality, there is an interaction between images of violence and other images which determine social stereotypes.

It is clear that the way children and adolescents perceive and absorb the scenes of violence that they watch on the screen remains

the central issue.[12] Racist, xenophobic, sexist and paedophiliac programmes altogether should be banned.

This leads me to a third conclusion, namely that of prohibitions. Banning programmes, video games and sites on the Net inspired by Nazism or fascism or propagating racist, anti-Semite, xenophobic or sexist raving is a subject of unanimous agreement. Similarly, there must be unrelenting tracking of paedophile sites and of people who trap children on the Net in a verbal exchange of a sexual nature. Such bans must be implemented through legislation with the aid of effective and severe penal sanctions. A ban on violent or pornographic programmes broadcast on television during specific times of the day is also widely advocated. This latter ban should be accompanied by clear information on the nature of the scenes contained in a programme for parental guidance. Parents must also have the possibility of obstructing the viewing of such programmes regardless of the time of day. In fact, in the United States, for example, in 1996, 54% of children and adolescents had a television in their bedroom (9). The percentage today is of the order of 70% and even if such figures in Europe are not quite the same, they are tending to rise.

Conversely, any overall ban on programmes which display violence or pornography would be futile and doomed to failure.[13] First, because the communication industries are extraordinarily mobile and are constantly launching new products onto the market derived from merchandising. That means that a hero of a television programme is to be found in the form of a toy or in video games and that it can have its site on the Net with camouflaged advertisements for encouraging the purchase of various products. Admittedly, some countries such as Finland and Sweden, have banned the advertising of war toys and games while others, such as Canada, ban advertising of such products within the context of programmes aimed at young people or exercise

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[12] The Groebel Report stresses a strong overlap in what 44% of the children surveyed perceive as reality and what they see on the screen. Many of these children are surrounded by an environment where "real" and media experiences both support the view that violence is a "natural" course of behaviour to solve a problem or a conflict.

[13] Conclusion also reached by the Groebel Report.

a right to monitor such advertisements with a view to ensuring that they do not mime violent acts with real characters or that they are not deceptive. Second, in addition to these bans, is it possible to protect young people hermetically from violent images? Should we do so? The information and communication industries make up a sphere of power and marketing in which colossal stakes are at play in terms of finance and influence. Today, these industries are in cutthroat competition with each other as what is at stake is young people who are not only consumers of their products today but, more importantly, will tomorrow become citizens and players in the economic, social, cultural and political life of the country.

Media education should be introduced in school curriculum

The fourth conclusion is a subject of unanimity. The outcome of research is quite categorical: it is essential that parents should monitor what their young children watch, introduce them to a critical interpretation of images and acquire the habit of discussing programmes with their children. It is also indispensable to introduce media education within the school curriculum, provided it is grounded on critical awareness. The relative weight of the media in the acquisition of knowledge through scientific programmes, documentaries, the Net etc. and the appropriation of values, ethical principles and a moral sense in relation to the school environment is such that it is indispensable that schools should train their pupils with regard to the media or, otherwise, they will venture backwards into the future. If we choose two pages at random in the billions of pages available on the net, 15 clicks on the mouse on average are enough to move from one to the other. This means that when the child is, for example, on an educational site, he or she may often be less than 15 clicks on a mouse away from a paedophile, pornographic or racist site, or one that advocates terrorism or is proselytising on behalf of a sect. These dangers do exist and cannot be made to disappear by means of bans. Conversely, young people can be prepared to cope with them.

Education through developing a critical attitude is starting to be included in school curricula. But it isn't always welcomed. In Argentina, in the 1980s, many teachers regarded the media as an evil

17

influence which children had to be protected from. On the other hand, in France, Audiovisual for All in Education (APTE) offers to teach children, from kindergarten to high school, this approach to what they see, to understand how images are made and their relationship to reality. Later, this new awareness gives children the desire to share their new knowledge with adults. In Portugal, the media was often used as "a supplement to teaching", but now the aim is more to understand its social function by encouraging children to be critical and demanding from a moral, social and aesthetic standpoint. In Spain, it is defined as "developing visual skills among television viewers" (10). Unlike reading or writing, which is learned by simple repetition, watching television does not give the viewer any greater ability to interpret its messages and techniques: "Educating viewers means making them active instead of passive. It means they watch but can also use language to express their own feelings and discover how audiovisual language works". Children can then become informed users of the media and contribute in a positive way to developing a democratic way of life. But, one must avoid demoralising them. So the question should be: what positive part can the media play in educating children?

An experiment in Brazil showed that children considered analysis and thinking a very important part of their education. Maria Luiza Bellani of the Federal University of Santa Catarina found the children also better understood their own relationship to the violence they saw on television and realised "the contradiction between their taste for it and their reasoned condemnation of violence in real life". This critical awareness was much sharper among poorer youth who "automatically mistrusted what was said on television". The information and communication industries should be encouraged to voluntarily adopt codes of conduct.

The fifth conclusion derives from the preceding ones. The information and communication industries could be made aware of the role they play and could be encouraged to explore other avenues. Voluntary approaches on the part of such industries are possible as shown by certain cases in Argentina and Germany. It is not utopian to think that there can be games and programmes which do not exploit a process whereby the image of the enemy is constructed on the basis of fear

so that subsequently, the image of that enemy may be destroyed by violence. Such games and programmes can be based on cooperation and solidarity. They can show that problems can be resolved through discussion, persuasion and conciliation. Power is not exerted through demonstrations of strength. We need only look about us to observe that those who exercise power level down obstacles, they negotiate and conclude alliances. If young people are to be introduced to power through games, it is the mastery of such instruments which should be our concern. It is in this direction that programmes should be designed, particularly for children and adolescents, left totally to themselves, particularly in the developing countries. Otherwise, can we be surprised at the fact that from Rio de Janeiro to Kuala Lumpur, via Johannesburg, they all watch the same violent films?

Closing remarks

I would just like to conclude briefly by saying that our only guide in this respect is the ethics of responsibility. We must fulfil our responsibilities towards our children without constantly expecting the public authorities to assume them in our place. The authorities must in turn assume their responsibilities vis-à-vis the whole of society by making the choices that need to be made, with due respect for human dignity, human rights and fundamental freedoms. Private decision-makers must in turn be aware of the responsibilities they take on and recognize that through the information and communication industries they contribute to moulding the society of tomorrow.

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