

# MASS MEDIA AND SOCIETY

## Media Effects

### Sex and violence in the media

One of the more controversial areas of study of the media is what effect the media have on us. This is particularly timely as eyes are on Hollywood and the violent and sexy movies it makes.

- Does all the sex in the media, particularly the movies and television, have anything to do with the sexual mores of society?
- How about violence in the media?
- Does it have a relationship with the increase in violence in our society?
- Does the media just mirror the sex and violence in society, or does it influence society? Remember the theme for this class that we discussed the first week (go back to themes lecture for a refresher.)

There have been countless studies trying to find out. Some of the most famous were the Payne Studies in the late 1920s that looked at the impact of movie violence on children. And starting in the 1960s people started looking for a cause for the increase of violence in society.

- Violent crimes in this country were on the rise.
- We were at war.
- A president (John Kennedy) was assassinated.
- A presidential candidate (Bobby Kennedy) was assassinated.
- A civil right leader (Martin Luther King) was assassinated.
- There was an attempt on the life of the Pope.

There had to be a cause. Why the sudden increase? To some, the media --especially television-- seemed a good candidate. After all, in the 1960s we had the first American generation raised on television. And if you looked at the fare on television, you saw all kinds of cop shoot-em-up shows. Movies, threatened with extinction thanks to television, had responded by including more violence and sex.

A number of long-term studies were conducted to determine what, if any results, all that media violence was having on us. Four major results came from these studies. A fifth one has evolved over time.

### Catharsis Theory

The first of these theories suggests that rather than be harmful violence in the media actually has a positive effect on society. The central assumption of the Catharsis Theory is that people, in course of daily life, build up frustrations. Vicarious participation in others' aggressions help release those tensions.

In other words, every day we frustrations in us build up. Without a release valve we risk the chance

of becoming violent, or at least aggressive. You do poorly on a test. You have to park too far away from the classroom. Some jerk cuts in front of you on the freeway. You get home and your significant other, or a child, starts demanding your attention. You snap back by yelling or hitting. That counts as violence as much as shooting someone. It is only a matter of degree.

The Catharsis theorist would say that by watching violence in the media you release some of that tension and are less likely to be aggressive or violent. But can you say the same thing about sex in the media?

## **Aggressive Cues Theory**

Then there is the opposite view, that violence DOES have an impact. Probably most prevalent of these theories is the Aggressive Cues Theory that has as its central assumption this: Exposure to aggressive stimuli will increase physiological and emotional arousal, which will increase the probability of violence.

In other words, all that violence gets the adrenaline juices in us flowing and makes us more edgy, increasing the chance that we'll be more aggressive or more violent. Aggressive Cues theorists are quick to point out that watching violence does not mean we'll always be more aggressive or violent, but it increases the chances.

And the way in which the violence is presented will have an impact on us, too. If we can relate to the protagonist committing the violence, or if the violence is presented in a justifiable way, we can be led to aggressive behavior.

If a bratty kid gets spanked in a media portrayal --clearly an aggressive and violent act-- it sends a message that corporal punishment is acceptable under the right circumstances.

If steelworkers see a show where steelworkers drink and brawl after work every day, they are more likely to accept that drinking and brawling are normal behavior.

## **Observational Learning Theory**

The Observational Learning theorist would take the Aggressive Cues theory a step further. This theory says that people can learn by observing aggression in media portrayals and, under some conditions, model its behavior.

If there are 50 ways to leave your lover, then there must be at least 49 ways to be violent or aggressive. And watching violent media portrayals will teach you new ways to be violent.

Ever watch a whodunit, such as a Columbo episode, where you spot where the criminal makes the fatal mistake? Ever catch yourself saying, "If I ever committed a murder I would not make THAT mistake?" What? Are you suggesting there is a circumstance where you would kill someone?

Or, how about this? Imagine walking down a dark alley and someone steps out in front of you and makes a threatening gesture. What would you do? Anyone think of some kung fu/karate moves you might make to defend yourself? That's a pretty aggressive/violent thought. And you learned it by watching a media portrayal.

So the Observational Learning theorist says that not only would the media violence increase the probability of the viewer committing an aggression or violence, it teaches the viewer how to do it. Does media mirror society or does it influence it? (The answer is both.)

Further, the Observational Theorist hedges his bet by pointing out that you will not automatically go out and mimic the violent act, but you store the information away in your brain.

Again, think about sex instead of violence. Does watching sexual portrayals teach you new ways to think about sex and perhaps engage in sexual acts? If you see that sleeping with someone on a first date is normal, after a while you start believing that everyone must be doing it, so you should, too.

### **Reinforcement Theory**

One theory says that media violence decreases the probability of violence by the viewer. Two others say that it will increase the probability of violence. And then there is the Reinforcement Theory that debunks both.

The central assumption of this theory is that media portrayals reinforce established behaviors viewers bring with them to the media situation. Violent portrayals will increase the likelihood of violent or aggressive behavior for those who accept violence and aggression as normal. It will decrease the likelihood of aggression and violence for those brought up to believe that violence is bad. Violence merely reinforces prior beliefs.

Instead of looking for blame in a violent media portrayal, the Reinforcement theorist would say that if you want to predict an outcome, look at the viewer's background. Look at the person's cultural norms and views of social roles. If person grows up in a crime-ridden neighborhood, then violent portrayals are more likely to lead to violence.

Obviously, selective perception (go back to the communication lecture) is going on here.

But the Reinforcement theorist would point out that there is going to be the exception to the rule. You are going to run across the gentle old man who everyone believed would never hurt a fly who whacks his family into a thousand pieces one day. Or you are going to find the gang member who one day recognizes the futility of violence and turns to the priesthood.

### **Cultivation Theory**

A final theory on the effects of violence in the media has evolved out of more recent studies. It is the Cultivation Theory. Rather than predict that we will turn to or from violence, it looks at how we'll react to the violence. The central assumption of the theory is that in the symbolic world of media, particularly TV, shapes and maintains audience's conception of the real world

In other words, the media, especially TV, creates fantasy world that is mean spirited and dangerous. It also creates stereotypes of dominant/weak folk in society. For instance, imagine a bank robber who is big and mean. Is your imaginary bank robber of certain race? Are all people that look like this bank robber actually mean back robbers?

Or how about this? You are starting to show some signs of age with gray hair and wrinkles around your eyes. If you are guy in the media, that is good. It shows a maturing. If you are woman, that is bad, it just shows that you are getting old and less vital. A male can be dominant and be looked up to. A woman who is dominant can be a bitch. All lawyers are crooks. All journalists are seedy (as in "The Front Page"). All media stereotypes!

And the media tell us that it is a mean world out there. Driving freeways is unsafe because of drive-by shootings and spectacular police car chases. Crime in the neighborhood is rampant if you look at the nightly news. Some people who live vicariously through television feel it is unsafe to leave their home or apartment and become shut-ins.

Here are some interesting YouTube videos on media effects:



Media Effects on Body Image

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qLCKJe8KEgY>



Racism and Stereotypes  
Portrayed by the Media

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xKYw0tKw6D4>



The Killing Screens: Media  
and the Culture of Violence

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2PHxTr-59hE&feature=related>



The Impact of Images

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bXBdGjPAks&feature=related>

## **Reading Assignment**

You should be reading the chapter on media effects and issues in your textbook to get more information about media and social issues.

## **Exercise**

Which of the above theories makes the most sense to you and why?

Note that when submitting the answer start the subject line with:

**J100x - YourLastName - Effects**

**Send to [rcameron@cerritos.edu](mailto:rcameron@cerritos.edu)**