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How the Mass Media Effects Our Values and Behavior
By Victor B. Cline, Ph.D.

President John Kennedy once stated, "We have the power to make this the best generation in the history of mankind of the last." Others have noted that our civilization is just one generation or twenty years away from savagery and whether this occurs or not depends on how we socialize our children and the general quality of our family life.

At the present time we are witnessing a virtual explosion of interpersonal violence in our society. As mentioned a moment ago, crimes of violence in U.S. are currently increasing at nine times the rate of population growth and this may be an underestimate because as recent government financed studies have shown, in some areas of the U.S. the majority of crimes go unreported. And while in Utah one may feel reasonably secure and safe walking about unescorted at night, there are many areas of the country constituting major pockets of violence where this could be regarded as a very high risk behavior and the height of foolishness.

However, even though Utah lags behind the rest of the nation in various types of social pathology, eventually even we are touched and affected.

The U.S. is now the most violent of all the major advanced literate societies in the world today. Our rate of homicide is four times greater than that of Scotland or Australia, and 10 times greater than the Scandinavian countries. Lest I be misunderstood, let me state that this is not a 10% difference of a 100% difference that I am speaking of, but rather this is a 1000% increment.

There are more murders per year on the island of Manhattan, or the city of Philadelphia, than in the entire United Kingdom including troubled Ireland with nearly 60,000,000 people. But not only are we violent, but many of us are also indifferent about the violence and the pain and distress wrought upon the lives of others. This condition has been termed "bystander apathy", by behavioral scientists. It might best be illustrated by the experience of Kitty Genovese, the Brooklyn girl who returning home one evening to her Kew Garden apartment several years ago, was brutally attacked, raped, and slain. This attack took some 35 minutes to accomplish. The young girl screamed, struggled, and cried for help during almost the entire time of her assault. Police later found that 40 people in the apartment complex were aware of her distress, yet not a single person made any effort to help or attempt to rescue her or even anonymously call the police.

If we search for the causes of violence in our society, we know that any single act has multiple determinants and most studies suggest that these determinants are usually found in the family experience as well as peer culture of the perpetrator.

However, the intriguing question which still remains is why is U.S. society so much more violent than our neighbors to the north and south, or say England? Or the other Western European countries?

One hypothesis which keeps re-emerging focuses on the nature of our television programming. If one analyzes the content of TV programs in England we find their rate of televised violence is only 1/3 that of ours. The Scandinavian countries have a much lower rate even than that. Thus, one of the major social-cultural differences between the U.S. with its high rate of homicides and violence and those other countries with low violence rates is the amount of violence screened on public television. Television is probably the second most powerful socializing agent in our society, exceeded only by the family and where the family is immobilized or disorganized, TV may be the most potent force.

Consider the following: Much of the research which has led to the conclusion that TV and movie violence could cause aggressive behavior in some children has stemmed from the work in the area of imitative learning or modeling which reduced to its simplest expression might be termed "monkey see, monkey do".

There have been numerous documented instances by children and adults of direct imitation of behavior and activities witnessed on the TV or movie screen. Many children have been injured and at least one killed trying to fly like Superman. A 14-year-old Canadian boy after watching rock star Alice Cooper engaged in a mock hanging on TV attempted to reproduce the stunt and killed himself in the process. Several months ago NBC-TV presented in early evening prime time a made-for-TV film, Born Innocent, which showed in explicit fashion the sexual violation of a young girl with a broom handle wielded by other inmates of a juvenile detention home. Later a California mother sued NBC and San Francisco TV station KRON for $11,000,000 charging that this show had inspired two girls and a boy to commit an almost identical attack on her nine-year-old daughter and an eight-year-old girl friend three days after those other children had witnessed this program on TV.

In a Salt Lake Junior High recently, two boys were found drunk in the classroom. An
Investigation showed that one of the boys had recently watched a 30-minute TV documentary on the making of whiskey and distilled spirits.

On the basis of this single exposure he built himself a still and made his own private alcoholic stock which he brought to school and shared with his companion.

The key slayer in the Ogden Hi-Fi murder case had seen the film "Magnum Force" three times the week before he forced his victims to drink lye (as a method of killing them) in direct imitation of what he had witnessed in this film.

The general notion behind modeling or imitative learning is that if you want someone to adopt a new behavior you show him a life or filmed model under attractive or glamorous conditions. For example, a young man may be afraid of snakes. You wish to cure him of this malady. You show him a cute little girl afraid of snakes. You wish to cure him of this.

Research by Stanford psychologist Albert Bandura has shown that even brief exposure on TV to novel aggressive behavior on a one-time basis can be repeated in free play by as high as 88% of the young children seeing it. Dr. Bandura also demonstrated that even a single viewing of a novel aggressive act could be recalled and produced by children six months later without any intervening exposure.

Other studies have estimated that the average child between the ages of 5 and 15 will witness during this 10-year period, the violent destruction of more than 13,400 fellow humans. This means that through several hours of TV watching a child may see more violence than the average adult experiences in a lifetime. Killing is as common as taking a walk. A gun more natural than an umbrella. Children are thus taught to take pride in force and violence and to feel ashamed of ordinary sympathy.

According to the Nielsen Television Index, preschoolers living at home are exposed to television an average of 54 hours per week. This means that by the time they are ready to enter kindergarten they have spent more time in front of a television set than the average college student will spend in the classroom during four years of college. Or with children of school age, during one year they will spend more time watching TV than they will spend in front of a teacher. In fact, they will spend more time watching TV than any other type of waking activity in their lives. It might also be noted that 98% of American homes have one or more TV sets.

So we might legitimately ask, "What are the major lessons, values, and attitudes that television teaches our children?" Content analyses of large numbers of program broadcast during prime viewing hours suggest that the major message taught in TV entertainment is that violence is the way to get what you want. Another major theme that many TV studies have shown to occur repeatedly is that violence is acceptable if the victim "deserved" it. This, of course, is a very dangerous and insidious philosophy. It suggests that aggression, while reprehensible in criminals, is acceptable for the good guys who have right on their side. But, of course, nearly every person feels that he or she is in the right. "Every man as William Saroyan once wrote, is a good man in a bad world...as he himself knows." Often the good guys are criminals whom the film happens to depict sympathetically as in a film such as "The Godfather." Who is good or who is bad merely depends on whose side you are on. Thus, much movie and TV programming for both children and adults presents an antisocial system of values. The lesson which is taught is that violence succeeds and violent methods are the ones most usually used in goal attainment.

Studies by McLeod and associates of boys and girls of junior and senior high school age found that the more the youngster watched violence on television, the more aggressive he or she was likely to be. Other studies revealed the amount of television violence watched by children, especially boys, at age 9, influenced the degree to which they were aggressive ten years later at age 19. The problem becomes increasingly serious here. Even if your child is not exposed to a lot of media violence, your youngster could still become the victim or target of aggression by a child whose parents were not so concerned and who is stimulated and influenced by the violence which he or she witnesses on TV.

Criminals are too frequently shown in movies and TV as daring heroes. In the eyes of many young viewers these criminals possess all that is worth having in life--fast cars, beautiful, admiring women, super-potent guns, modish clothes, etc. In the end they die like heroes, almost as martyrs. But then only to appease the old folks who insist on a crime-does-not-pay ending.

The hard scientific evidence clearly demonstrates that watching television or movie violence sometimes for only a few hours and in some studies even for a few minutes, can and does instigate aggressive behavior that would not otherwise occur. If only 1% of the possible 40 million people who saw "The Godfather" on
TV recently were stimulated to commit an aggressive act, this would involve some 400,000 people. Or if it were only 1 in 10,000 it would involve 4,000 people plus their victims.

Some parents believe that if their children are suitably loved, properly brought up and, emotionally well-balanced, they will not be affected by media violence. However, psychiatrist Frederick Wortham responds to this by noting that all children are impressionable and therefore susceptible. We flatter ourselves if we think that our social conditions and family life and education and entertainment are so far above reproach that only emotionally sick children can get into trouble. As Dr. Wortham points out, if we believe that harm can come only to the predisposed child, this leads to a contradictory and irresponsible attitude on the part of adults. Constructive TV programs are praised for giving children constructive ideas, but we deny that destructive scenes give children destructive ideas.

It should be noted that the "catharsis theory" in Vogue a few years ago which suggested that seeing violence was good for children because it allowed them to vicariously discharge their hostile feelings, has been convincingly discarded. Just the opposite has been found to be true. Seeing violence stimulates children aggressively. Much of it also shows, and in a sense teaches them explicitly, how to commit aggressive acts.

The speaker has conducted research of his own studying the desensitization of children to TV violence and its potential effects. In our University laboratories we set up two six-channel psychographs which had the capacity to measure emotional responsiveness in children while they watched violent TV shows. When most of our subjects saw violent films, those instruments measuring heart action, respiration, perspiration, etc., all hooked up to the autonomic nervous system, did indeed record strong emotional arousal. Next we studied 120 boys between the ages of 5 and 14. Half had seen little or no TV in the previous two years and hence had seen very little media violence. The other half had seen an average of 42 hours a week of TV for the past two years and a great deal of violence. As our violent film we chose an 8-minute sequence from the Kirk Douglas prizefighting film, "The Champion", which had been shown some years before on TV reruns but which none of the boys tested remembered ever having seen. We considered other more violent TV films but they were too brutal, we felt, to be shown to children and raised numerous ethical concerns. The boxing match seemed like a good compromise. Nobody was killed or seriously injured, nothing illegal occurred, yet the fight did depict very graphically and explicitly, human aggression which was emotionally arousing. These two groups of boys watched our film while we recorded their emotional response on the physiograph. The results showed that the boys with a history of heavy violence watching were significantly less aroused emotionally by what they saw. They had become to some extent habituated or desensitized to viewing violence, suggesting the possibility of an emotional blunting or loss of conscience and concern in the presence of witnessed aggression. This means that they had developed a tolerance for it and possibly some indifference toward human life and suffering. They were no longer shocked or horrified by it, which suggested to us the many instances of bystander apathy which has frequently been noted to occur especially in large urban areas where citizens have witnessed others being assaulted and have not come to their rescue or even tried to secure aid or help. Or incidents such as the My Lai massacre where American soldiers killed innocent Vietnamese civilians and even small children. This suggests an unfeeling, indifferent, non-caring, dehumanized response to human suffering and distress. In any event our research has presented the first empirical evidence that young people who are exposed to a lot of TV violence, do, to some extent, become blunted emotionally or desensitized to it. Since our children are an important national resource, these findings suggest that we should teach them wisely. The kind of fantasies we expose them to may make a great deal of difference as to what kind of adults they become and whether we survive as a society.

Let me now summarize and review the implications of some of my remarks. There is now a great deal of scientific evidence that suggests that for children from relatively average home environments, continued exposure to violence is related to the acceptance of aggression as a mode of behavior. The results now also show clearly demonstrated link between the viewing television violence and aggressive behavior. During the last decade two national violence commissions and an overwhelming number of scientific studies have continually come to one conclusion: televised and filmed violence can powerfully teach, suggest--even legitimize--extreme antisocial behavior, and can in some viewers trigger aggressive or violent behavior. The research of many behavioral scientists has shown that a definite cause-effect relationship exists between violence on TV and violent behavior in real life. As Robert Liebert, a psychologist at Stony Brook, has put it: "Any steady diet of television will have a powerful influence on children. Its affect is, the inevitable, natural consequence of observing the behavior of others. Modeling, in which a child learns from witnessing the actions of other persons is a cornerstone of social development. (Monkey see, monkey do.) Television by its very nature brainwashes children in that it shapes the way they view the world and the kind of people they will be." Of course, there is much additional evidence now that suggests that adults are also affected by the kind of television and motion pictures they are exposed to.

Another example of the power of modeling or imitative learning comes from studies on the origins of some sexual deviations as well as changing them in therapy. Witnessing pornography can introduce long lasting fantasies into the mind or brain which in some cases can be converted
into deviant sexual inclinations and ultimate deviant behavior. Time precludes an extensive discussion of these mechanisms but they are discussed at length in my recent book, "Where do you Draw the Line", published by your Brigham Young University Press.

Having been engaged in behavior science research for some twenty years, the inescapable conclusion I have reached is that the media—television, commercial motion pictures, printed matter and even advertisements in magazines, on TV, etc.—can fill our minds with fantasies and images that can powerfully affect our beliefs, feelings, values and then our behavior, and it can be for good or evil.

I have chosen the area of violence to illustrate my thesis of how moral, ordinary people can be induced through "persuasive communications" to engage in behaviors which are highly inimical to their self-interest as well as being irrational and ultimately self-destructive. In fairness we need to indicate the other side of the coin. That the same techniques and tools or persuasive communications which can manipulate behavior, values and choice detrimentally can also be used for beneficial purposes. In fact, many behavioral scientists are now studying how TV and motion pictures can be used to teach children prosocial behavior and we are just beginning to see a whole wave of research findings powerfully demonstrating that children can be taught via movies or TV: self-control, number concepts, increased vocabulary, sharing, willingness to help others, or even not to smoke because it may harm your health.

While the values modeled in many commercial motion pictures and television entertainments are nihilistic and antisocial—which in fact often reflects the lifestyles and pathological value system of their creators, it doesn't necessarily have to be this way. It seems entirely possible for the artist, the playwright, the lyricist, the novelist, the creator of cinema—to produce models of man in many instances which emphasize coping behavior in coping situations, life not death, health not pathology, competence not ineffectualness and inadequacy. I see the arts and artists as now having an almost incredible potential and power to shape our future and, almost even the very nature of man himself.

We are moving into an age of the reduced work week and earlier retirement with much increased leisure time, which means that the theatre, our entertainments, sports, recreations and the arts will all occupy an increasing portion of our time and psychic involvements. This is associated with an even greater penetration of the electronic age involving instant audio-visual communication available to us all. These facts taken together have profound implications for the artist and the entertainer to influence us. It is these people, for most Americans, who are now becoming the new high priests of our society, influencing our fashions, our styles of sexual expression and even effecting our most basic values and behavior.

In an attempt to analyze in depth the content, values and themes modeled in our present day cinema, the speaker conducted a survey of every motion picture playing in Salt Lake City area several years ago. We analyzed altogether 37 films. We found that 62% of the films reviewed presented an essentially fatalistic viewpoint of life and human destiny, in which man was caught by forces that he could not really control or cope with and in which he had to endure his fate without much hope of resolving his difficulties or conflicts. This approach in some ways the existential view of man, though here it also suggested an additional impotency and ineffectualness.

Fifty-seven percent of the films presented dishonesty in a heroic light or as being justified by the hero because of the circumstances. Thirty-eight percent of the films presented criminal activity as something that pays off or as being a successful and an exciting past-time with no negative consequences. In 59% of the films the heroes killed one or more individuals. Seventy-two percent of the heroines were presented as being to some degree sexually promiscuous. In fact, only one film suggested normal sexual relations between a man and a woman legally married to each other. In other words the model of sex presented in most American cinema is almost entirely illicit. In only 22% of the films were any of the principal figures seen engaged in what might be termed healthy and reasonably satisfying marriages. Thus in sum, we found that the majority of our modern cinema heroes are anti-heroes who, for the most part, are unprincipled, unrestrained, lacking in impulse control and unconcerned with the rights or sensitivities of others—they could be best described as character disorders or psychopathic personalities—for the most part.

I am personally convinced by a vast amount of research, that the images, fantasies and models which we are repeatedly exposed to in our advertisement, our entertainments, our novels, our motion pictures and other works of art can and do powerfully effect the self-image and later the behavior of nearly all men. We, in a sense, are at your mercy. The novelist, poet, creator of cinema, the lyricist, the playwright, I would plead with you to give us—at least in part—a new vision of man, a new set of heroes. Let us see at least some heroes who can cope, who can solve problems in responsible ways. And these productions and creations need not be devoid of tension, conflict, and great diversity—which are the very essence of nearly all drama and great art. But we need to see people sacrificing for a greater good, overcoming temptation, disciplining their emotional and psychological resources in climbing new Everests.

What I am suggesting, no less is that if our civilization is to survive, our arts will have to contain some positive values and which at least some of the time present an image of man and his infinite capacity to love and have concern for the welfare of his brother and his neighbor.