The Media

Worksheet 3.1: Media Violence

Read the passage below and answer the questions that follow

The real puzzle is that anyone looking at the research evidence in this field (on media violence) could draw any conclusions about the pattern, let alone argue with such confidence and even passion that it demonstrates the harm of violence on television, in film and in video games. While tests of statistical significance are a vital tool of the social sciences, they seem to have been used more often in this field as instruments of torture on the data until it confesses something to justify a publication in a scientific journal. If one conclusion is possible, it is that *the jury is not still out. It's never been in.* Media violence has been subjected to lynch mob mentality with almost any evidence used to prove guilt.

This is perhaps most clearly shown in claims that some of the most distressing crimes of late have a media link. For example, Anderson and Dill suggest that violent video games were probably a factor in the massacre at Columbine High School. Four years later, Anderson listed a dozen cases from 1997 to 2003 where violent crime has been 'linked' to violent video games. However, as social scientists, they should be ashamed of themselves in offering only second hand undocumented hearsay support for a link. The uncritical use of media stories speculating that there might be a link sits uneasily with the values of empirical psychology. LINE 10

Of course such claims are very common, perhaps often made in good faith, and sound very plausible, but they have never stood up to scrutiny. In Britain, the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (1994) asked James Ferman (Director of The British Board of Film Classification) what the evidence was in this area. He had advised the committee that, for more than twenty years, whenever some claim was made that a serious crime was linked to a video or a film, he had always investigated the case. He observed: LINE 20

I do not know of particular cases where somebody has imitated a video and gone out and actually committed a serious crime as a result of what they have seen. (Home Affairs Select Committee, 4th Report, 1994, p 5)

Similar conclusions were reached by the BBC's Chief Reporter, Kate Adie, and her team in 1988. They researched eight of the best evidenced cases where a crime had been clearly 'linked' to the mass media for the flagship current affairs programme *Panorama*. To their surprise, none of these cases was supported by any evidence that would be acceptable to a serious investigative journalist. Every single one turned out to have been based on mere speculation – sometimes by proselytizing judges but often by fanciful journalists. LINE 30

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Concerns about media violence are quite persistent ones. New media inevitably inherit the legacy of anxieties about rising crime and wayward youth that have fuelled moral debates for centuries. In 1776, Joseph Hanway blamed debasing amusements and newspapers for the 'host of thieves which has of late years invaded us'. In 1869, Greenwood complained that 'penny dreadful' comics 'may sow the seeds of immorality among as many boys as a town may produce'. By 1905 Charles Russell did not need to ask whether theatres caused crime in Manchester's youth: 'horrible murders and terrible tragedies were enacted before the footlights' [which lead to] 'so many instances of violence on the part of young men in the back streets of the city'. Similar worries have been raised about radio, the cinema, the internet and popular music. LINE 40

The apparent timelessness of such concerns does not invalidate them but should alert us to the existence of well rehearsed frameworks to explain social ills. These seem readily evoked about violence in popular culture but not when it comes to more established forms of artistic expression (such as theatre, opera, painting or literature). Moreover, it seems clear that some graphic images such as in news coverage from Iraq are perceived as an acceptable face of violence to have on our screens. The point must be that violent representations are not to be condemned *per se*.

Goldstein shows that the relationship audiences enjoy with violence in entertainment is a rich and multi-layered one which studies of video violence effects completely ignore. To suggest that these studies are misleading would be too kind. Many appear simply deceitful. LINE 50 However, the absence of convincing research evidence that media violence causes harm does not mean that we should necessarily then celebrate it and encourage more. There may be moral, aesthetic, philosophical, religious or humanistic grounds on which we might consider that excessive representations of violence are a matter of some public interest. But that is another story.

Adapted from Cumberbatch, G. (2004) *Video Violence: Villain or victim? A review of the research evidence concerning media violence and its effects in the real world with additional reference to video games*, Video Standards Council

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Questions

1. Drawing on the passage, explain in your own words why the author is so critical of research on the effects of media violence.

2. What support does the author offer that the evidence has been used in an unscientific manner?

3. What evidence is there in the article that the media has frequently been the victim of moral panics in society and used as a scapegoat for social problems?

4. How might you explain the point made in the article that violence in popular culture in treated rather differently from that shown in more high culture 'established forms of artistic expression (such as theatre, opera, painting or literature)' (ll. 43-44), and in news coverage of violence.

5. 'Goldstein shows that the relationship audiences enjoy with violence in entertainment is a rich and multi-layered one which studies of video violence effects completely ignore' (ll. 48-49). Identify and explain the sociological theories of media effects which might illustrate this 'rich and multi-layered' relationship.