

Television and Crime—a Causal Link?

by

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The concern which is now being expressed about the possible influence of television on deviant behaviour has previously been expressed about the influence of films, comics and other media. Considering the present lack of concern for these other media, why focus on television?

The very strength of public opinion seems to demand it. Crime is an important area of concern to the individual citizen who, as a potential victim, is intensely interested in any hypothesis which suggests a possible cause of crime. That the ordinary person does see a casual link between television and crime is shown by a Gallup poll cited in Leo Bogart's *The Age of Television*¹—70% of the adults questioned placed at least part of the blame for the “upsurge in Juvenile delinquency” on mystery and crime programmes on television. In addition, nearly half of a Palo Alto survey by Bell reported that their children had been emotionally disturbed by such programmes.

A second reason why we should focus in on television, is its very pervasiveness.

[T]he mass media are an integral part of the daily life of virtually every American. Among these media the youngest, television, is the most pervasive—95% of American homes have at least one television set, and on the average that set is in use for about forty hours each week. Television has a central place in American life.²

¹ L. Bogart, *The Age of Television* (London, 1958).

² “*To Establish Justice, to Ensure Domestic Tranquility*”, the Final Report of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence (1970) 160, also referred to as the Hendrickson Committee Report.

These figures are not exclusive to America—Schramm reports that the figures of average daily viewing are similar for all economically developed countries with a wide-ranging television network.³

Is the public concern justified? Have researchers in this area found a causal link between television programmes and criminal behaviour? After reviewing the literature, it is apparent that this is a confusing area, full of contradictory statements by eminent researchers. One of the earliest criticisms of communications research was the dearth of information. For example the 1956 United States Senate subcommittee on Juvenile delinquency condemned the lack of verified evidence, and the testimonials based solely on professional judgment. Today the reverse situation applies—there is a mass of empirical evidence, but no uniformity in conclusions. One of the reasons for this is, according to a U.S. National Commission of 1970, the difficulty of designing studies linking human behaviour or personality formation to media content, which also takes into account, “the vast array of other variables in the social environment that coverage to shape a person’s conduct and values”.⁴

Notwithstanding this lack of conformity of opinion (which precludes a definitive statement on whether a causal link does in fact exist) certain themes have appeared so frequently in the literature that they would appear to have some validity. One is that television is a “school for crime”. Thus, testimonies before the 1956 Hendrickson Subcommittee spoke of juvenile delinquent boys who had mentioned that the techniques they used in crimes of violence came directly from a television programme. Bernard Brown, in his book *Crime and the Law*⁵ reports the concern that criminologists have over the portrayals or reports which detail the methods employed by criminals. Thus, while television may not actually subvert innocent people into criminals, it may aid those with criminal leanings, and give an impetus for crime by providing potential techniques.

Yet, while television may not subvert ordinary people into directly committing criminal acts, many researchers believe that people can be subverted by the values, or lack of them, transmitted through television programmes. H. J. Skornia,⁶ noting the co-existence of “the cheap, the vulgar, the violent, and the sacred” concludes that this gives an impression of almost complete valuelessness. The danger in this is that, as broadcasting does not discriminate between opinions, neither does the viewer. Skornia then proceeds with the view that, if

³ Andre Glucksman, *Violence on the Screen* (London, 1971) 21.

⁴ Final Report of the National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, 160.

⁵ New Zealand Government Printer (Wellington, 1969).

⁶ H. J. Skornia, *Television and Society* (New York, 1965).

television can be said to have any value, at all, they are those of “the salesman, big businessmen, manufacturers and showmen who control it materialistic values. Television extols the spender”.⁷ This is supported by Schur⁸ who believes that:

Not only do the media heighten lower class frustration by making vivid to the poor person what he is missing, but they hammer home again and again in subtle and not subtle ways that personal worth is to be measured in monetary and material terms.⁹

A plausible extrapolation from these statements is that television may goad into action those at the bottom end of the economic scale who dream of the “good life” of things which, while not being accessible through legitimate means are available through theft, through misrepresentation, etc. Put another way, the value emphasis of television programmes demand that many people reconcile conflicting values, and adjust back and forth many times a day between the values taught by television fantasy and the values that are apparent in his real personal world. Strains may result which not all are capable of meeting.

Mental hospitals and prisons are full of people who could not make such adjustments. Prison records reveal criminals who feel that prison is more endurable than conformism and imprisonment in a society which is seemingly full of contradictions.¹⁰

A third common theme that appears in the literature is that, although it has not and perhaps cannot, be proven that television programmes are a causal factor in some crimes, they may influence the way in which pre-existing tendencies find expression. Schur, on a review of sociological research findings suggest that these “indicate that the dominant effect of media experience on the individual is the reinforcement of pre-existing outlooks”.¹¹

This conclusion is closely related to the discovery of three major processes involved in contact with the media:—selective exposure, selective perception and selective retention. People tend to expose themselves to media content that corresponds to the attitudes that they already hold, they tend to see what they want to see in this content, and they tend to be impressed most by items that are in line with their own views and earlier impressions.

Whether or not television programmes “cause” crime, concern must be raised about the attitudes to the law that are fostered on this medium. Many television programmes appear to promote dis-

⁷ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁸ Edwin M. Schur, *Our Criminal Society The Social and Legal Sources of Crime in America* (New Jersey, 1969).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁰ Skornia, *op. cit.*, 165.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, 74.

respect for law and law enforcement officers. Thus Skornia¹² abhors the impact of programmes, such as those with Mickey Spillane, which teach that it is quite proper to ridicule police officers, or to take the law into one's own hands, thus replacing legally constituted authority. In this way television may impair the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies by undermining the public support which is a necessary element in their functioning. This indifference to law enforcement is also portrayed on television in another way—in half of all violent episodes analysed by the Media Task force of the 1970 U.S. National Commission witnesses were not involved. When they were present, witnesses were usually passive and either did not, or could not, intervene. In the rare instance in which a witness did intervene it was often to encourage or assist violence rather than to prevent it.¹³

The themes and controversies outlined about television and criminal behaviour in general, will be better clarified if one aspect of criminal behaviour is examined in detail. I have chosen to look at the hypothesised relationship of violence on the screen and violence in reality.

Considering that the number of crimes of violence occupy only a very small percentage of the total number of crimes, why study this aspect? Television encourages material consumption in the face of statistics that most offenders are property offences, and that most of these are committed by those in the lowest socio-economic groups yet voices are relatively muted on this score in comparison with the voverous complaints about the impact of screen violence. This is the reason researchers have focused on this area—public opinion has demanded it. G. A. Steiner¹⁴ made a statistical study of opinions held by Americans on the influence of television and found that complaints about the amount of violence ranked first in the list of public grievances. This finding was supported by the 1970 U.S. National Commission which received from the general public more suggestions, strong recommendations and often bitter complaints about violence on television than about any other single issue.

What is meant by "violence"? A serious divergence of opinion in the definitions of the broadcasting industry and the general public is apparent. The B.B.C. Code, for example, points out the necessity for distinguishing between different types of violence—brutality is not identical to violence, and violence is not the same thing as combat. When public opinion criticises screen violence however it has in mind, according to Andre Glucksmann,¹⁵ a whole range of acts from

¹² *Op. cit.*, 171.

¹³ Final Report of the Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, 165.

¹⁴ Cited by Glucksmann, *op. cit.*, 15.

¹⁵ *Idem.*

physical brutality to the transgression of moral laws. The “violence” which comes in for general and undifferentiated criticism covers any kind of conduct presented on the screen which would, if carried out in reality, be illegal, immoral or simply brutal. “The violence disapproved of on television is seldom defined with any precision.”¹⁶

Despite the limitations imposed by imprecise definitions, researchers have attempted to discover the amount of violence that actually appears on the screen. Systematic studies conducted in the early 1950s for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters found that in an analysis of programmes over a one-week period, an act or threat of violence occurred every ten minutes of broadcasting time. In addition, this violence occurred mostly in crime, western and comedy programmes.¹⁷ As recently as 1968 the viewing public were still being exposed to a high level of televised violence. The Media Force found that, during one week trial periods in 1967 and 1968 eight out of every ten dramatic programmes contained some violence, and that eight out of ten violent episodes occurred in a serious or sinister context.¹⁸

In addition, a 1962 study (quoted by the 1970 U.S. National Commission) compared the occurrence of “aggressive episodes” to the occurrence of “protective and affectionate” behaviour finding a four-to-one ratio of assault to affection.¹⁹

To dwell solely on quantitative data in an examination of a possible causal relationship between television and violent acts is not enough. It is one thing to document the frequency with which violence is depicted, and quite another to demonstrate that this really has harmful social effects. Quality and kind of violence is a relevant dimension to explore in this regard. As a result of a survey of children, Himmelweit concluded that children were not at all alarmed by violence in westerns, somewhat more alarmed by violence in crime films and terrified by that in horror films. To Himmelweit this broad finding proves that the impact of violence on the screen varies according to the context. Account, therefore, must be taken of film genres which give violence a specific atmosphere.²⁰ Other researchers have introduced other variables which suggest that the effects of screen violence are not homogeneous. The physical presentation of the violent act should be taken into account, likewise the moral context—“justified” violence, frequently seen in westerns, has not the same impact as “unjustified” violence.

¹⁶ *Idem.*

¹⁷ Schur, *op. cit.*, 76.

¹⁸ Final Report of the National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, 164.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁰ Glucksmann, *op. cit.*, 24.

So far, in attempting to answer the controversial question of whether screen violence precipitates violence in society, I have outlined both the amount and kind of violence that is depicted on the screen. It is my intention to now go beyond this rather descriptive data and look more specifically, at what has been written on the direct and indirect effects of television violence.

In the section on television and crime in general, it was stated that television values may have a subversive effect on an individual, making him more susceptible to criminal acts. The same idea can be applied in the present discussion—there are moral and social values explicit in the context within which violence is portrayed. The extent to which these can influence actual criminal behaviour can only be subjectively determined. Nevertheless, studies have shown that “valorization of violence” occurs in many programmes. For example, the Media Task force of the 1970 U.S. National Commission found that, in the programmes analysed, more than half of the leading characters inflict violence in some form on others. Most of these violent encounters are between clearly identified “good” and “bad” guys. The violence is, moreover, initiated about equally by each type—with the result that the distinction between “good” and “bad” is not determined by the use of violence. In addition, nearly half of all leading characters who kill, and more than half of all leading characters who are violent achieve a clearly happy ending. More disturbing however is the finding that lawful arrest and trial are indicated as a consequence of major acts of violence in only two out of every ten violent programmes.

A related study mentioned by the same commission found that violent means were used 47% of the time to obtain goals, with “escape” and other non-legal means short of violence adding another 15%.²¹ The general conclusion to be drawn from these statements is that television portrays a world in which “good guys” and “bad guys” alike use violence to solve problems and achieve goals. Violence is rarely presented as illegal or socially unacceptable. Indeed, methods that are not socially approved seem to be portrayed as having a better chance of achieving the desired goal than those methods which are socially approved. Thus, while we may never be able to measure the effect of the value emphasis of television, the potentially deleterious results on our crime problems of this indirect impact should not be overlooked by programme planners.

A wide range of opinion exists on whether there is a direct causal link between television and violence—each point on the continuum

²¹ Final Report of the National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, 163.

has its supporters. Without therefore being able to come to a firm conclusion (and this parallels previous discussion on television and crime in general) I will nevertheless outline the contradictory arguments of the two extremes of this continuum.

Those that believe in "no effect" use as one of their defences for programmes of violence that they provide a catharsis for viewers is that latent violence in a person is "worked out" by watching violence. The opposing camp, as illustrated by the work of the sociologist Berkowitz, believes that this theory is based on misrepresentations and that television does not act as a safety-valve. The results of their empirical studies suggest that violent tendencies are increased, not reduced, by absorbing screen violence. Thus Berkowitz would formulate an equation of frustration plus violent film equals aggressive behaviour. Yet, another series of equally vigorous experiments (e.g., those of Ancona) would favour the formula of frustration plus violent films equals diminished aggression.²²

Himmelweit puts forward the notion of a "vaccination" effect of screen violence—by being repeatedly exposed to violent acts one becomes "immune" and thereby the impetus to commit similar acts is diminished. In direct contrast Miriam believes that the reiteration on the screen of violent acts could have the effect of setting up a behaviour pattern which might, in certain circumstances (e.g., too much to drink) become a sort of "conditioned reflex" with some types of individuals.²³ The duality of vaccination/conditioning thus repeats that of catharsis/imitation.

In the section on television and crime in general it was suggested that the dominant effect of media experience was the reinforcement of pre-existing tendencies. A similar statement has been made in the narrower context of the effects of screen violence. Thus Schramm believes that if an individual has not had satisfactory reality experiences, has undue frustration in social relationships and is mentally "unhealthy", he will not be insulated against the harmful effects of exposure to violence. Put more simply "children who are already unbalanced or predisposed commit such crimes or act"²⁴ as they see depicted in the violent content of television programmes.

The broadcasting industry have, according to Skornia, exploited this contradiction that a given programme will do one person harm and yet cause no apparent harm in another. Since they find it most profitable to define and operate their medium as part of the mass media the "average becomes the normal".²⁵ Cases which do not

²² See Glucksmann, *op. cit.*, 46, 47.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ Skornia, *op. cit.*, 174.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

conform are simply dismissed as deviant or atypical. Skornia makes the vital point that human beings cannot be averaged as if they were numbers.

A small group of people, done harm, may well be more important than a thousand times as many who are done no harm . . . anyone who has seriously studied the statistics of more brutal crimes during the last few years well knows how a number of them have been committed by a very small number of psychopaths.²⁶

What then, if anything, should be done? While there are doubts about the supposed effects of television on crime, it would seem reasonable that something should be done. Schur, for example, advocates that programmers reduce the crime and violence content not required by the basic needs of the plot and atmosphere creation. He notes that:

Such activity may have some influence in preventing reinforcement of crime-conclusive outlooks, and it is unlikely to do any real harm of anyone.²⁷

This latter point is, in my opinion, very important in light of a survey conducted by Himmelweit, Oppenheim and Vince.²⁸ When asked to plan an ideal evening's entertainment only 10% of the adolescents and 26% of the younger children mentioned programmes of crime, westerns and detective series in their bill of fare. "It would seem therefore that the number of these programmes could be reduced without fear of losing the audience."²⁹

Television is a channel that bypasses censorship or "adults only" limitations (compared with the cinema). However, as exemplified by the 1970 U.S. National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, and the majority of reviewed specialists in the field, government censorship is not advocated as a method of reducing the crime content of television programmes. Schur, and others, instead feel that it is up to the general public (who after all, express great concern on the issue) to act as a watchdog, i.e., a strong argument can be made for continuous public pressure on the media to exercise greater care in editing and programming.

On the other hand the broadcasting industry, according to Skornia, insist that they count on the family to balance and control television uses. This may, however, be an unrealistic expectation in the light of surveys which have found that, while most parents wish to eliminate programmes of crime, violence and horror from their children's

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

²⁷ Schur, *op. cit.*, 79.

²⁸ H. Himmelweit, A. Oppenheim, P. Vince, *Television and the Child* (London, 1958).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 20.

television diet, only a tiny fraction of these believe that they can actually keep their children from watching such programmes.

The practical problems of monitoring children's television habits are too great in the fact of the pervasiveness of televised crime and violence.³⁰

In addition, the effects of television on the family may make this group a less reliable control than it used to be. In many cases family members, being saturated with television values, become themselves mere vessels of these values. Some parents are, therefore, as subject as their children to over-consumption of certain programme genres and are as much in need of non-television counter balances as many of the children.

As long as a definitive answer (to the question of whether television programmes "cause" some people to commit criminal acts) eludes us, research must continue. The questions which need to be asked in this regard are: What research should be required by the television industry itself? What part of it should be carried out by or on behalf of the government? How might such a research effort be best organised and co-ordinated? These questions can only be answered within the context of a specific nation. Yet they must be answered if the issue of television and crime is to become a subject of national interest and constructive, objective thinking. It is to be hoped that a combination of internal and international research will clear up the confusion and contradictions which abound in this area of criminological concern.

³⁰ Final Report of the National Commission on Causes and Prevention of Violence, 170.