

A Thematic study on the cause and effects of Television Violence on Children

Sujala S.Nair¹ and P.E Thomas²

Department of communication and media studies Bharathiar University, Coimbatore

Abstract: Television has been a subject of discussion ever since it was introduced in India as an experimental educational service in 1959. From various studies it has been found that children with heavy exposure come under the influence of violence portrayed on television than children with moderate or light or no exposure. Similarly children with heavy television exposure are the ones who learn and imitate TV behaviours more than children with moderate or light or no exposure. Television is extremely popular with children as it has a multi-sensorial appeal. It is believed that repeated exposure to real-life and to entertainment violence may alter cognitive, affective, and behavioural processes, possibly leading to desensitization.

In the present world with all-encompassing hostile television and infants being vulnerable to its effects, the depiction of television violence has become the noteworthy factor in causing antagonistic behaviour among children. This research is a thematic endeavour to analyze whether the exposure to television violence leads to real-life violent behaviour among children. The area of the study has been confined to three different aspects though there were other aspects which felt less appealing. Findings of the study will help in development of resources to assist parents in the constructive and educational use of media with their children. A descriptive method is used here. The effectual and customary parental mediation of their children's viewing by restricting the amount and types of programs being watched forms the conclusion.

Keywords: Television (TV), children, violence, desensitization, parental mediation.

1. Introduction

Television can be a powerful influence in developing value systems and shaping behaviour. Unfortunately, much of today's television programming is violent. Violence can be defined as something which is intended to hurt or kill or it can be just physical or emotional force and energy.

Extensive viewing of television violence by children causes greater aggressiveness. Sometimes, watching a single violent program can increase aggressiveness. Children who view shows, in which violence is very realistic, frequently repeated or offenders go unpunished, are more likely to imitate what they see. Children with emotional, behavioural, learning or impulse control problems may be more easily influenced by TV violence. The impact of TV violence may be immediately evident in the child's behaviour and serious interpersonal violence is caused due to the increased long-term exposure to:

- Plays or films in which close personal relationships are major themes and which feature verbal or physical violence.
- Programs in which violence seems to be thrown in for its own sake or is not necessary to the plot
- Programs featuring fictional violence of a realistic nature
- Programs in which the violence is presented as being in a good cause
- Violent Westerns.

¹ E-mail: sujala.nair@yahoo.com; Contact: 9442637811

² E-mail: thomasmediastudiesbu@gmail.com; Contact: 09842084804

There are three leading theories on the subject-Desensitization Theory, Social Learning Theory, and Social-Cognitive Observational Learning Theory all show different perspectives on the relationship between child development and media exposure.

The core of Desensitization Theory revolves around the idea that people have an instinctual negative reaction to violence and that this negative reaction is diminished with repeated exposure to it (Josephwolpe, 1950)

Social Learning Theory is simply the postulation that children learn behaviours from their surroundings by observation (Albert Bandura, 1977)

Social-Cognitive Observational Learning Theory - this theory claims that exposure to media violence influences children's aggressive behaviour because young children imitate many specific actions they see. This theory is the most accurate and all-encompassing theory concerning media violence because it asserts that media violence gives children a perception of a world that is more hostile than it is in reality, teaches them at some level that violence is acceptable and normal behaviour(Albert Bandura,1977).

Though all the theories pinpoint on the same area with respect to TV viewing, the present study was only dealt on the social learning theory formulated by Albert Bandura. The two areas focused in this study only highlights on the major aspects of violent behaviour with respect to imitation and observation resulting to aggressiveness in children.

2. TV violence and aggressive behaviour on Children

There has been a lot of association of TV viewing among children with relevant to violent behaviour. The more the children are exposed to television, the more they get influenced by violence portrayed. Television is blamed for provoking delinquency and violence, for causing moral depravity and for undermining family life in children (Berger, 2003). The most outcome of the violence research was the gradual development of a set of middle-range theories that summarized findings and offered increasingly useful insight in to the media's role in the lives of children.

As Aletha Huston and her colleagues wrote after reviewing decades of scientific research on the question. "The accumulated research clearly demonstrates a correlation between violence and aggressive behaviour--that is heavy viewers behave more aggressively than light viewers". Both experimental and longitudinal studies support the hypothesis that viewing violence is casually associated with aggression. Field experiments with preschool children and adolescents found heightened aggression among viewers assigned to watch violent television or film under some conditions" (1992,pp.54-55)

"Evidence suggests that violence on television is potentially dangerous, in that it serves as a model for behaviour -- especially for children" (Aronson, 1995, p.265).

Bandura (1965) stated that children can learn new behaviours in one or two ways. They would learn it by direct experience through trial and error or by observing and imitating others in their social environment. He pointed out that observational learning is ultimately more efficient than trying to discover on your own. Experimental studies conducted by Albert Bandura and his colleagues (1961) exposed nursery school children to a filmed model who were engaged in violent behaviours, often directed against a plastic, inflatable Bobo doll or punching bag. The researchers consistently found that children, who were exposed to a violent model, were more likely to act aggressively than children in control groups who had not viewed violence.

A similar study was conducted by Feshback and singer after reviewing in 1961 and they obtained similar results in 1971. The research was conducted in a group home for preadolescent boys. For six weeks, half of the boys were restricted to watching TV programs with little or no violence while the other half were allowed to watch violent content. A variety of behavioural measures indicated that the boys viewing the violent programs were less aggressive, whereas the boys who were not allowed to watch some of their favourite shows became more aggressive out of frustration.

Aggression in children does not really mean only watching violence in television but there are also other possibilities of their getting violent when left isolated or ignored from being watched. Feelings of anger and

hatred may result in threatening or violent behaviour in children. Aggressive behaviour in pre-school children is different from that of pre-adolescent stage while watching violence in television.

3. Early TV viewing and Aggression in later years

Children who watch violent movies at young age are prone to aggressiveness and criminal behaviour at later stages too. In a longitudinal study (Huesmann, 1986), the same sample of children were tested over a 22-year period. The researchers measured television viewing habits and aggressive behaviour at three different points in time: when the participants were 8, 19 and 30 years of age. The research revealed a link between exposure to TV violence at age 8 and self-reported aggression at age 30. Moreover violent TV programmes watched in childhood were a significant predictor of the seriousness of criminal acts performed at age 30. The study concluded that “Early childhood television habits are correlated positively with adult criminally independent of other likely causal factors”

The three potential harmful effects of exposure to media violence are the learning of aggressive attitudes and behaviour, desensitization- because of all the exposure to TV violence, children become desensitized to violence and perhaps a tendency develops in some viewers to rely on violence in their own lives to solve problems and fear-media violence creates fear in audiences (Strasburger & Wilson, 2002). “Exposure to television violence increases aggression because violence increases excitation, or "arouses" viewers (Tannenbaum & Zillman, 1975).

Studies in India and abroad show that children are the main viewers of television. They form a large majority of TV audience for all programmes (Agni, 1980). In a study conducted by Operation Research Group of Vadodara in four metropolitan cities, the average percentage of viewing for adults and children were 37 and 57 in Chennai. Children are not only the main viewers of TV but they also watch for a longer duration than adults (Chawla, 1986). TV violence legitimizes and justifies violence and aggression as a solution to problems (Padgaonkar, 1999).

Most psychologists agree that experiences children have during their early years will have a longstanding impact in their lives. "What a child learns about violence, a child learns for life," states ACT against Violence. The organization breaks down the early years of TV viewing development this way:

<p>INFANTS (0—18 MONTHS) From birth to 18 months, infants are interested in TV only for brief periods of time because they are attracted to the light and sound.</p>	<p>TODDLERS(18—36 MONTHS) They pay much more attention to what is on TV and are able to get meaning from programs they watch. They react equally to animated violence and real violence because their link between fantasy and reality is not strong.</p>	<p>PRESCHOOLERS (3—5 YEARS) Children look forward to shows. They understand what they are viewing, but cannot give it a context. They cannot judge reality versus fantasy or commercials versus regular programs. They are attracted to highly vivid scenes, rapid movement, sound, and colour. In other words, most children pay the most attention to the most violent scenes on the screen.</p>	<p>ELEMENTARY SCHOOL AGE (6—11 YEARS) Children believe that TV reflects real life and will become more active and show more aggressive behaviour after viewing violent scenes. High viewing levels have been shown to interfere with reading development.</p>
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Though the subject to criminal behaviour in children with respect to early TV viewing cannot be generalized, still it plays a vital role in today’s scenario as a matter of discussion. Criminal behaviour in children need not really be involving in criminal activities like terrorism or murder but it can also be their attitude and pre-conceived notions about the outer world which helps in changing their life-style and shaping their behaviour.

4. Socialization and parental Mediation

Socialization is a life-long active process, beginning on the day of one’s birth. The child learns to socialize from the parents and the social groups he or she belongs to. As children grow up they come into contact with other primary and secondary groups which provide them their sets of attitudes, beliefs, and

norms of behaviour. The child begins to imitate them, particularly in cases where he or she is least integrated in to the family or the peer group. Such children rely heavily on media advice and models; while others do not since their activities outside the home provide them greater stimuli and other role models. Television is an early window. That is, it allows children to see the world well before they are capable of competently interacting with it. According to Joshua Meyrowitz explained, television “escorts children across the globe even before they have permission to cross the street” (1985, p.238)

Rossiter and Robertson (1974) suggest that parent-child communication about television is necessary if children are to develop adequate defences to negate the influence of television commercials. While co-viewing and verbal interaction may provide some means to offset the impact of television on children, others suggest that parents often attempt to directly monitor and control what their children view on television (Ward, Wackman and Wartella 1977). Parents, who control the content of children’s television viewing, may feel that they are in a better position to share their values with children (Robertson 1979). In addition, these parents may try to shield children from what are believed to be potentially harmful programs (Muehling, Carlson, and Laczniak 1992). Watching and discussing programs and commercials with children are indicative of an open communication environment in homes where parents exhibit a warmer relation with children (Carlson and Grossbart 1988; Carlson et al.1992).

The socialization effects of mass media cannot match the power of the home, the neighbourhood and the school where interpersonal relationships exist. In contrast, socialization through mass media is depersonalized and hence effective mainly in the peripheral areas of life.

5. Conclusion

Now-a-days children spend most of the time in front of the ‘Idiot Box’ (TV) and less time outdoors. They spent time watching cartoons, horror movies and TV shows. Parents too don’t have any control on their off-springs. In order to do their household work and to control their children, they switch on the TV and allow their children to watch. As time passes by, they become addicted to it and start recognizing the characters. They feel that whatever is portrayed on TV is real and they start imitating those characters. Some theorists feel that watching violent movies alone will not make them violent, but stopping them from watching TV can also make them violent out of frustration. Nevertheless, it is clear that there is a considerable amount of violence on television and that this violence on the small screen may translate into changes in attitudes, values, or behavior on the part of both younger and older viewers.

There can no longer be any doubt that heavy exposure to televised violence is one of the Causes of aggressive behavior, crime and violence in society. The evidence comes from both the Laboratory and real-life studies. Television violence affects youngsters of all ages, of genders, at all socio-economic levels and all levels of intelligence.

Television (TV) has its good side. It can be entertaining and educational, and can open up new worlds for kids, giving them a chance to travel the globe, learn about different cultures, and gain exposure to ideas they may never encounter in their own community.

Media is not the only root cause for this problem, but it also rests in the hands of the parents who can help in monitoring their child and by teaching them what is right and wrong. The behaviour of parents themselves has a more powerful influence on their children than isolated events and experiences. This study further suggests measures to overcome this problem by making the parents limit their children’s total media time(with entertainment media) to no more than 1 to 2 hours of quality programming per day and to remove television sets from children’s bedrooms.

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