AGAINST ORTHODOXY: THE MEDIA DO INFLUENCE US

With violence and the media back on the political agenda, David Miller and Greg Philo, two longtime observers, break ranks with the academic liberal orthodoxy to claim that we should be concerned with media violence

● If the 'anti-effects' arguments claiming that television has *no* effect on viewers' behaviour were applied to the influence parents have on their children's behaviour, they would read something like this:

The view that parents influence how their children grow up is widespread. However, there are theoretical problems with such a crude 'effects' approach, in what is obviously a very complex and highly mediated area. Firstly, research results have been inconclusive. In laboratory conditions many children were observed not to do as told when given instructions by parents. Other children, asked if they always obeyed their parents, replied, "No way man," and, "You must be joking." Such children were therefore concluded to be "rejecting" and "negotiating" parental messages.

Some commentators go further, arguing that how children are brought up has "no effect" on their subsequent growth and development. Asserting that the whole 'effects' debate may be wrongly constituted, they argue that children may well only "agree" with parents when they are already pre-disposed to, so that parental 'effects' may merely be the reinforcement of existing systems of beliefs and attitudes. The popular obsession with parenting and its influence, other theorists worry, is part of a general propensity to look back to a mythical golden age when children obeyed their parents without question. The New Right has assembled a powerful ideological package to 'blame parents' for wider social ills, placing them in a long line of scapegoats for (alleged) increases in violence, crime and the corruption of youth. Part of this package is this dwelling on a mythical past. The moral panic around parenting is a mask for the reactionary social fears of moral campaigners. Despite an enormous research effort, no link between so-called parent socialisation effects and the subsequent behaviour of children can be found.

In other words, when applied to other areas of social life 'anti-effects' arguments can suddenly look extremely dubious. Lab experiments may be inadequate; politicians may have their own agendas: but these facts say nothing about the nature of the socialisation process, or about the specific influence on children of parents, or on viewers of media. Parental socialisation of children is not simply a matter of telling them what they must do: though often unaware of it, children do also absorb patterns of behaviour, potential responses to situations, a sense of what is funny or fearful. Of course, whether any of this is also true of how children are socialised by television would have to be researched in its own right.

It's often argued that media are merely scapegoats in political polemics. Robert Potts, writing in *The Guardian* (22 March 1996), is typical: "The fact is that, once again, film and video are becoming the scapegoats for the horrors which they only represent. There have been countless examples of such reactions; and the history of such examples effectively gives the lie to the idea that a new popular medium poses a unique threat to society suddenly poisoned. Theatre, cheap paperbacks, music hall, rock and roll music, punk, horror comics, and the cinema have all in their turn provoked fears of the corruption of youth and the disintegration of public order, until a new medium claimed the attention."

However frequently put forward, this 'scapegoat' argument says nothing of the influence of media on the development of different types of behaviour, and certainly proves nothing about the *non*-existence of such influence. Moreover, it diverts us from the central issue, which is to understand the *nature* of any impact media might have. It is strange that Potts, a journalist attempting to convince his readers, should be committed to the media's *lack* of influence. On the contrary, we believe the media to be powerful channels for the development of new ideas and potential behaviour. For 'the authorities' have often been quite correct (in their terms) to see new media as calling for the 'disintegration of public order'. The radical press in nineteenth-century Britain *was* profoundly revolutionary – this is why the authorities attempted to proscribe it. Who imagines that Bertolt Brecht's or Dennis Potter's plays are intended to be anything other than subversive? For the powerful, new ideas can be dangerous – and new (or old) media can certainly develop them.

Innocent of culture

Some laboratory experiments are clearly and seriously inadequate, models attempting to measure changes in human behaviour as if they were a chemical or biological process. Emerging from positivist social science, such oversimplified stimulus/response research is unable to study the processes of sense-making which inevitably occur between the media and their audiences: these accounts tend to remain innocent of the notion of a 'culture' in which representations circulate, and by which audiences understand and interpret meaning. Rarely are the systems of meaning surrounding portrayals of violence examined: for example, whether it is seen as 'legitimate' or 'enjoyable'. Instead, media content is analysed by means of static and *a priori* categories concerning the degree of 'graphic' or 'explicit' portrayals of 'violence'.

The irony is that much of the research concluding that there are limited 'effects' depends on equally stunted positivist methodology. Much comes from social psychology; and as Willard Rowland has shown (in his 1983 study *The Politics of TV Violence: Policy Uses of Communication Research*) much is associated with the in-house audience-research departments of the broadcasters themselves, limited effects being conducive to the legitimation of the television business.

Alternatives to such research are hard to find, however: critical work in this area is very much lacking. Sociologists have tended to leave the field to psychologists and behaviourists. Questions of television and violence have been ignored, played down or regarded with weary disdain. One reason for this is the rise of theories of the "active audience", which have pushed "questions of influence almost entirely off the agenda" (John Corner *et al*, in 1990's *Nuclear Reactions: Form and Response in 'Public Issue' Television*). Reception theory has tended to emphasise the ability of media audiences to interpret what they see, and to bring their own experience and critical faculties to media texts. But such 'active audience' theory inhibits the investigation of the role of the media in forming and changing people, societies, cultures and governments. And while in different areas the work of critical theorists relies on explicit assumptions (and statements) about media power and the reproduction of ideologies, even they have tended, when discussing violence, to go along with the argument about audience 'activity'.

A desperately bad argument

This reluctance to acknowledge any media effects in the area of violence pushes otherwise critical authors towards inadequate arguments about

media power. For example, the counterargument against any analogy with advertising often recurs (as here, in Martin Barker *et al*'s 'Proposed text of statement' circulated following publication of Elizabeth Newson's *Video Violence and the Protection of Children* in March 1994): "It is commonly argued that 'the media must have effects, or advertisers would not spend so much money on advertising products'. Sadly, this is a desperately bad argument – not because it is necessarily untrue, but because it makes the absurd assumption that there is only one kind of 'effect' that a programme, or an advertisement, can have. With advertisements, for example, we know that among their most likely 'effects' are to make consumers aware of the product, to make them feel that if they belong to a certain group then this product might be part of their lives, and to make them make associations between the product and other things which they value, or aspire to. There is nothing as simple as 'causing people to go out and buy'. If we therefore relate that to 'violent' films, it becomes quite clear that this is no argument at all for seeing films as 'causing violence'. We would have to fail any student who could not see the crude fallacies in that argument."

Luckily for us we are not students of these authors, or we too would have our assignments failed. We cannot see the crude fallacies here – nor are we able to avoid concluding that the authors actually believe that advertisements *do* have 'effects' or 'consequences'. If consumers are made aware of a product, or to make associations with it, or to feel that they belong, these are certainly already 'consequences' (and if they then go out and buy, as many of us in fact do, further consequences are added). Languages *are* systems of meaning, but only a foolish analyst would suggest that because interpretation is necessary, the use of language has no effects. Reception theorists may emphasise the centrality of meaning in the production and circulation of beliefs and ideologies, and will maintain that meaning depends on interpretation. But to do so says nothing about the possibility or existence of effects (see John Corner's 1995 *Television Form and Public Address*). Clearly 'language' has consequences on belief and behaviour, whether we think of these as orders being issued and obeyed, or in terms of identification and positive evaluations of role models. The key point here is that even if we acknowledge an intervening process of meaning and interpretation, it is still the case that sometimes when people buy advertised products – as all of us at some time will – this is a result, or a consequence (or an effect?) of the advertisement.

To show that fiction never influences perceptions and behaviour, it is often argued that people are able to distinguish easily between factual and fictional media, and between fantasy and reality. But being able to recognise that fantasies are not reality does not mean (for example) that fantasies of power and control, or of victimisation and subordination, play no role in 'real' events and actions. Since fictional models may extend what people believe is possible in practice, questions about processes of influence are hardly invalidated.

In relation to children, the argument is predicated on notions of 'play' as an inherently positive, creative and assimilative form of learning. It is sometimes argued that such fantasies or 'pleasures' are usually a positive feature (sometimes intrinsically positive) of the imaginary worlds in which problems can be solved and resentments and aggression dissipated. But as Stephen Kline (in *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing*, his 1993 study of toy marketing) argues, "play activities exhibited with contemporary toys reveal evidence of imitative learning in which children accommodate their mental schema to prevailing attitudes and norms in society. Two aspects of toy marketing seem to stress these imitative aspects of pretend. The first is the narrow scripting of the associated television animations to elicit carefully targeted play values. The second is the way most toy advertisements model repeatedly a style of play which replicates the television scripts in the depiction of children's play behaviour".

Furthermore, as Ros Coward has argued in relation to children's programming, and especially in programming associated with advertising toys, "violence and owning weapons is seen as a vital part of masculine identity... Films and TV programmes currently directed at boys teach about power. Power in these fantasies is to be different from girls; power is the possibility of annihilating opposition and frustration; the means to that power is through guns and the military. For feminists the whole question of the relationship between fantasy and reality has always been a... pressing political question... Women feel that many aspects of the cruel and unfair treatment which they receive at the hands of men is precisely because, in interpersonal relationships, men live out socially approved fantasies of what women are and what women want." (*Marxism Today*, December 1987).

Folk devils and hooligans

So critical theorists study the media because they think them powerful, but then won't say so when discussing violence. This apparent anomaly arises because the debate about effects is seen as a cover for a reactionary political agenda. Those who advance arguments for media effects are assumed to be doing so for undisclosed ulterior motives on censorship: "Again and again it has been shown that attacks on the 'influence of the media' act as masks for other kinds of social concern... It must be a matter for serious concern that much that calls itself 'research' has been distorted by an inability to see beyond the vague categories and embodied fears of moral campaigners." (Barker *et al*, 1994.)

The tendency is thus to displace the argument onto the terrain of censorship, with the Left (as Coward also noted in *Marxism Today*) allying itself with liberals and libertarians in an anti-censorship position, and critics of that position caricatured as 'moral' campaigners. Yet the question of the influence of the media is separate from decisions about regulation and censorship. It is a risky diversion, one consequence being that no coherent alternative to 'no effects' can be advanced about the relationship between social institutions, the media, the public and outcomes.

Thus, in a 1994 letter circulated with the 'Proposed text of statement' responding to the Newson report, Martin Barker argued explicitly for an alliance based on a negative position: "We are aware that inevitably, and rightly, there will be differences and areas for debate among many of us about precisely how to frame our own positive positions. That is why it seems right, in the first instance, to take up an essentially negative position."

The negative position includes critiques of political agendas, and of the framing of debates on violence, concentrating on theories of 'respectable fears' and the 'moral panic', as evolved via Stan Cohen's *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (1972) and Geoff Pearson's *Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears* (1983). Classic texts, both are somewhat limited in their explanatory power and have been rather overplayed in the development of defences against censorship. Pearson's *Hooligan* deconstructs the notion that a stable, domestically peaceful, traditional 'British way of life' has suddenly been plunged into an unnatural state of disorder. Pearson valuably highlights the regularities and absurdities of some media and public debate on violence in society, and reveals the peculiar historical forgetting of the intimate part violence has played in British history, both in the sense of 'law and order', and in the sense of the imperialist violence which British status and power were built on. He argues "that for generations Britain has been plagued by the same fears and problems as today."

But though he carefully notes that "social circumstances do change," he does tend to imply that the past is *always* viewed with a rosy tint: "Without a shadow of doubt, each era has been sure of the truthfulness of its claim that things were getting steadily worse, and equally confident in the tranquility of the past – although, significantly, there have always been those who questioned whether the problem had enlarged in the public mind. Each era has also understood itself as standing at a point of radical discontinuity with the past, but when we reconnect these bursts of discontent into a continuing history of deterioration, must not the credibility snap – unless, that is, we judge ourselves to be in a worse condition than the poor, brutalised human beings who suffered the worst effects of the Industrial Revolution?"

Though suggestive, this is untrue. We do not always 'look back' to a mythical past which is better or more orderly than our own is presumed to be. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, British society was widely felt to be calmer and more settled than during the earlier periods of industrialisation (thus, H. C. G. Matthew writes, in 'The Liberal Age' in 1992's *The Oxford History of Britain*, "Though political rioting did not altogether disappear, it became infrequent enough to encourage widespread comment. Crime on the mainland, both in the form of theft and of acts of violence, declined absolutely as well as relatively... The Criminal Registrar noted in 1901 that, since the 1840s, 'we have witnessed a great change in manners: the substitution of words without blows for blows with or without words; an approximation in the manners of different classes; a decline in the spirit of lawlessness'").

Moreover, the judgment about whether we perceive ourselves to be in a worse condition than the "brutalised" human beings of the Industrial Revolution is of a quite different order to a judgment or analysis of the prevalence of interpersonal violence.

When society frays

Clearly there are both differences and similarities between the 1890s and the 1990s. But the 'mythical past' argument is not in itself evidence that the level and type of violence and the extent of ▶

social disintegration in contemporary society have *not* changed in the last 20 years. The incidence of murder, child murder, assault or rape are all empirical questions, and many people perceive a recent increase in their own personal vulnerability to violence. Stuart Hall, a key critic of the media tendency to exaggerate violence for particular ends, has nevertheless stated that, "[T]here can be little doubt that the character and pattern of violence has changed. Most people, including myself, now feel personally more vulnerable than they did in the recent past." (*The Observer*, 29 August 1993). Hall argued that for most of us, social conditions have declined under successive Conservative administrations, not just materially but also at the level of culture and representation. But the 'mythical past' model would dismissively consign such opinions to 'respectable fears'.

The remainder of the anti-effects argument is as follows: levels of violence and crime are exaggerated in public debate (meaning the media), usually in order to further the ends of the powerful. 'Moral panic' theory argues that inegalitarian societies reinforce social control in reaction to perceived threats to societal order. Cohen, the theory's originator, states that moral panic occurs when "[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests: its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to."

> ## "Most of us feel more vulnerable than in the recent past"

The 'moral panic' has since become a regular shorthand for dismissing fears about links between the media and violence. But as an instrumental model it assumes a functional relationship between the priorities of moral campaigners and the state, and between media coverage, public opinion and decision-making in society, in which the following chain of causally linked affairs exists: (1) a unity of interest (or at least tacit alliance) between moral campaigners and the state (which are often actually confused with one another); (2) that this coalition is successful in placing the issue on the public agenda; (3) that media coverage of media influence exaggerates the problem as a result; (4) that the public are misled and that reactionary social change is legitimated.

We don't suggest that such a causal chain could *never* operate. However, it seems clear that it has not done so in relation to recent 'panics' on media violence. Most obviously, such a model struggles when explaining any one of these four states of affairs – sensational media coverage, for example – without the others, let alone the fact that sensational media coverage (which is often the only evidence by which a 'panic' is identified as such) may not have the anticipated effect. We would contend that the tight and linear causal chain between these four events is in fact an artefact of the method used for the study of 'panics' by both Cohen and later by Hall and others (in 1978's *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order,*

Hall/Critcher/Jefferson/Clarke/Roberts). The analysis of press coverage is *not* a sufficient basis from which to extrapolate the actions of a control culture, of public belief or of decision-making. More to the point, to dismiss concerns about media effects by invoking the mechanism of moral panic is contradictory, since the very notion of 'moral panic' assumes that the media have straightforward and direct effects on public opinion and decision-making. In the case of the violence debate, we are required to believe that the media have *no* effect upon children, but a *major* effect on their parents.

Watching and believing

So what is the relationship between media content, socialisation, public belief and societal change? People in society really do change, under a variety of influences. It seems strange that the potential impact of media on behaviour in contemporary society can be dismissed in such an off-hand fashion. Our own research suggests that film and television can have powerful influences on audiences.

For example, media information can strongly influence perceptions about events and actions in the world, and questions of causation and blame. In studies of the Northern Ireland conflict (David Miller's own *Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media*), beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 per cent of the sample believed the allegation that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details – supplied by media and/or government sources– were false.

Miller also found that 42 per cent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[B]ecause of what I hear on TV I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming *Dying of Ignorance: AIDS, the Media and Public Belief*, the overwhelming emphasis in media coverage has been along the official line (that heterosexuals were at serious risk from HIV), and despite challenges from certain sectors of the scientific community and media to this line, the public was overwhelmingly convinced of this line.

Fictional media accounts can also structure, shape and influence perceptions, beliefs and popular understanding (in some cases more powerfully than factual accounts). In research on the media and public beliefs about mental illness (1996's *The Media and Mental Illness*, ed. Greg Philo), audience group members directly relate their beliefs about schizophrenia – derived from newspaper reports on such murderers as Dennis Nilsen and the Yorkshire Ripper – to such soap-opera characters as *Brookside*'s Trevor Jordache, the child abuser and wifebeater. As one audience group member commented: "He looks like a schizophrenic – he's like a split personality, like two different people."

Though it is in fact very *untypical* for mentally distressed people to be violent, this contrasts

sharply with media representations of mental illness. A key finding of the study was that the level of fear generated by media accounts was such that it could overwhelm direct experience in the formation of beliefs. One young woman lived near a psychiatric hospital, had worked there at a jumble sale and mixed with patients. Though the people she met weren't violent (many were geriatric), she still associated mental illness with violence: "None of them were violent – but I remember being scared of them, because it was a mental hospital – it's not a very good attitude to have, but it is the way things come across on TV, and films – you know, mental axe murderers... [T]he people I met weren't like that, but that is what I associate them with."

We also found that fictional television could produce very strong affective responses towards specific characters. For example, in the soap opera *Coronation Street*, the character Carmel had an erotic obsession with the partner of Gail, a regular character: Carmel attempts to destroy Gail's relationship and to abduct her partner's son. We asked members of our audience group what they would have done in Gail's position. Most advocated a violent response ("killed her", "battered her bloody mouth in", "kicked hell out of her", "scratched her eyes out", "I would have killed the cow"); replies suggesting Carmel needed medical help came from those who had direct experience of mental illness.

Yet while this example shows how television can produce strong emotional responses among audiences, it does not necessarily show that the programme generated in those who saw it an original propensity to violent behaviour. The potential for violence in interpersonal responses among the audience could have developed elsewhere. The impact of television was to generate new feelings of anger, and to channel their direction.

Certain essential questions for further research seem to remain. How does violence become part of the human vocabulary of potential behaviour, and do the media in contemporary society have an influence in this? If violence can be seen as efficient in achieving goals, or as pleasurable in its own right, do media images encourage or develop such perceptions in the viewer? How are such elements of personal response constructed? How are links made between sex, violence and power at the level of individual understanding, perception and desire? What we need is a sociology of the development of motivation, belief and interpersonal response. Societies do change: we need to be clear that many factors may promote social cohesion, disintegration or transformation. Debates about media violence are currently dominated by crude stimulus-response models because no alternatives are being advanced. Critical scholars must make positive contributions to this discussion. It is no longer enough to stick to vague negative assertions that "There is no evidence...".

This essay was originally commissioned as a chapter for a book entitled 'Ill Effects', edited by Martin Barker and Julian Petley, to be published shortly. A contract was issued by the publishers Routledge, but the editors then decided that the arguments of our piece were contrary to those of the rest of the book, and it was therefore excluded. This was a very controversial decision, which we the authors contested – but to no avail. The editors persisted in their view that the piece "reads like a hostile review of the book in which it appears." Consequently we decided to publish the piece elsewhere.