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Media Psychology 101

Christopher J. Ferguson, PhD

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This book is dedicated to my father, Edwin, and my son, Roman, my Saturday afternoon movie buddies. And, as ever, to my wife, Diana, for her ongoing support without which I would never get anything done.
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Everybody knows that media does or doesn’t (pick one) have a profound influence on our lives and behavior. It’s common sense! Except what is common sense to one person is absolute rubbish to the next. There are probably few areas of modern social science that are as fiercely and rancorously debated as is media psychology. Beginning with the Payne Fund studies of the 1930s, nearly a century of social science research has failed to definitively bring us to any conclusions. Are there any?

Media certainly is an important part of our lives. Our use of media exploded through the 20th and into the 21st centuries, such that media ranging from books to computers to cell phones are an integral part of most of our lives. Further, the line between entertainment media and industry media has become increasingly blurred. But do media profoundly shape us? Or does media merely reflect our own lives (sometimes in ways that are less than flattering)? Despite considerable hyperbole and politicking, the answers are often subtle and individualized. Or, put another way, it’s often hard to give people the answer they want to hear if we are sticking close to the data.

This book concerns itself with the research on how media influences people, how people influence media, and how society even influences the way we try to answer questions about how
media influences people. In addressing many of the questions about how the media influences us, the answers may surprise you. You may not like some of them. But I hope you will enjoy joining me on this exploration of this ubiquitous force in most of our lives.
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In August 2013, entertainer and former child star Miley Cyrus generated controversy by “twerking” at the MTV Video Music Awards (VMAs). Twerking, if you didn’t know, is a suggestive dance move that involves considerable wiggling of the buttocks. Personally, the outcome generally appears more silly than erotic, but it’s certainly designed to offend those with gentler sensibilities. It’s perhaps not surprising, then, that Cyrus’s efforts, which included suggestive dancing with singer Robin Thicke, raised both news headlines and hackles. The Parents Television Council (PTC), an antimedia advocacy group that has been involved in numerous disputes over television content, including Janet Jackson’s 2004 “wardrobe malfunction” at the Super Bowl, promptly criticized the performance in a press release. All this criticism was, of course, a wonderful way to draw attention and viewership to the performance, presumably the opposite of the stated intention of
those very same critics. Being a fan of neither the VMAs nor Miley Cyrus, I would not have seen the clip other than to find out what all the fuss was over. Some began to speculate that both Cyrus and the PTC calculated how to profit over the controversy, speculation that was fueled by the observation that Miley Cyrus’s father, Billy Ray Cyrus, sat on the PTC’s advisory board.

The Miley Cyrus twerking incident was hardly the end of the world, but it highlights the issues of concern to media psychology. Was Cyrus’s behavior in some way harmful to society? Would young girls, for instance, be encouraged to sexualize themselves in imitation of Miley Cyrus? Some people observed that Cyrus received much more criticism than Robin Thicke, the male performer in the act. Is there sexism at play in how men and women are judged for their sexuality? Why do certain media events elicit such intense emotional reactions from audiences? (The Janet Jackson “wardrobe malfunction,” in which her pierced nipple was visible for approximately half a second on network television, is another such example.) How do those emotional reactions shape the rhetoric of politicians and, indeed, scientists themselves? Can the social science of media effects be separated from the politics and cultural wars that so often surround media? Our personal and societal interaction with media is complex, difficult to disentangle, and often infused with great controversy. And that’s part of what makes it fun!

WHAT IS MEDIA PSYCHOLOGY?

As is often the case with psychological disciplines, there is no single, agreed-upon definition of media psychology. Division 46 (2014), the Division of Media Psychology and Technology of the American Psychological Association, offers this definition: “Media Psychology applies the science of psychology, from cognitive psychology and neuroscience to clinical
practice, to research, analyze and develop mediated experiences using technology with the goal of benefiting society.” The division emphasizes that “media” does not necessarily imply “mass media.” Bernard Luskin (2013) wrote that media psychology involves not only research into media effects, but working with media producers, developing media using psychological principles, providing education on media, and appearing in media to educate. Pamela Rutledge (2010) outlined media psychology under the following points (quoting directly):

1. Media technologies are everywhere.
2. People of all ages use media technologies a lot.
3. Young people use them the most.
4. Older people worry about younger people.
5. Technology is not going away.
6. We all worry if this is good or bad or somewhere in-between.
7. Psychology is the study of people of all ages.

Rutledge summed up her observations: “Media psychology is using #7 to answer #6 because of #1 through #5.”

Media psychology has a unique challenge. Unlike studying, say, the bacteria that live in the gut of an earthworm, or whether we process words more with the left hemisphere of our brain or the right, media is an integral and often disputed part of our culture. That is to say there have been perennial struggles over the content of media and what is acceptable. Liberal elements among media producers typically try to push the envelope of what is acceptable, while more conservative elements of society push back, often with expressed worry over media effects. The case of Janet Jackson’s 2004 wardrobe malfunction, mentioned earlier, is an excellent example. During the halftime performance of the 2004 Super Bowl, televised nationally, singer Justin Timberlake pulled away part of Janet Jackson’s jacket to reveal (for about half a second) her exposed breast. Whether this “wardrobe malfunction” was accidental or calculated has itself been the subject of intense speculation. The brief incident elicited a firestorm
of both criticism and corresponding incredulity over the intensity of that criticism (so much fuss, after all, being made of a half-second of breast). The Federal Communications Commission, receiving most of those complaints, ultimately fined CBS hundreds of thousands of dollars for the incident but, in legal wrangling that lasted until 2011, the fines were ultimately overturned because of vagueness in the FCC’s rules.

We might legitimately ask, what influence does brief exposure to a woman’s breast have on the minds of developing children who happened to be watching the Super Bowl? But it can be challenging to remain objective when there is so much emotional and social pressure and politics in play over a media-content issue. Indeed, as we see in the next section, the history of media and society has often involved considerable push and pull between social forces advocating greater liberalization or restriction of media content.

**MEDIA THROUGH HISTORY**

Modern concerns about media content are nothing new. Wherever there have been efforts to entertain through media, there have been critics concerned about the deleterious effect of such efforts on youth. No one really knows when Homo sapiens began to attempt to entertain each other through some form of early media. Dance, music, and storytelling may have emerged soon after the emergence of symbolic thought and language, although such expressions don’t leave physical traces in the sense that tools do.

The oldest forms of artistic expression for which we do have records are cave paintings. Such art ranges from simplistic drawings and shapes to more elaborate depictions of hunting, dancing, and religious symbolism. The earliest known cave art is thought to be about 40,000 years old (Pike et al., 2012). This is a rough estimate of course—carbon dating isn’t always precise,
older paintings may have washed or faded away, and so on. But we can say that modern humans were interested in some form of media at least 40,000 years ago, if not longer. Some of the early paintings appear to even depict sex acts. So as soon as we had cave art, we had cave porn!

As far as books or literature go, one of the earliest literary works is the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the tale of an early Sumerian king, which is dated at approximately 2000 BCE (Hallo & Simpson, 1971). The *Epic of Gilgamesh* concerns the Sumerian king Gilgamesh, who may have been a half-forgotten historical figure, much as some speculate the Briton King Arthur may have had some historicity, ignoring all the bits about Merlin and magic swords. According to the epic, Gilgamesh is a powerful ruler but also a bit of a jerk who, among a variety of other jerkish behaviors, forces young brides to spend their wedding nights with him rather than with their new husbands. The Sumerian gods aren’t exactly the best behaved either but, in this case, take umbrage at Gilgamesh’s haughtiness and naughtiness. They send a beast-man, Enkidu, to fight Gilgamesh and humble him. The two heroic figures fight an epic battle (of course, this is an epic) which ends in a draw. This makes them fast friends, and Enkidu becomes a kind of spiritual leader for Gilgamesh, reforming the bad boy into a more responsible king. Together like brothers, they go on to fight all manner of naughty creatures threatening Sumer, end up annoying the Goddess of Love and War, Ishtar, whose advances Gilgamesh rebuffs (Ishtar’s lovers had a habit of ending up dead, so who can blame him?), and search for the secrets of immortality.

Like plenty of books, movies, and television, *Gilgamesh* is rife with violence and sex. It is the *Game of Thrones* of its time. *Gilgamesh* is perhaps the best known of the early Sumerian legends that have survived, but themes of heroic adventure, violence, sex, rape, and cruelty are not uncommon among other Sumerian stories (Hallo & Simpson, 1971). Was the sex and violence in this origin story controversial to the Sumerian people? Were there early Sumerian advocates for the equivalent of content labels on *Gilgamesh*? Few records of public discourse exist from this time,
and Sumer wasn’t exactly the sort of culture that prided itself on public discourse and debate anyway, so we don’t know. However, the very popularity and survival of *Gilgamesh* across such a span of time speaks volumes.

*Gilgamesh* makes it clear that people have always been interested in seeing explicit material in their media, whether sex or violence. Perhaps this is because such material reflects human nature (Kottler, 2011). Because of its explicit nature, however, media has often come into struggle with moral advocates who worry about the influence of media, particularly for groups society has sometimes perceived as impressionable. Currently we worry mainly about the poor, but historically society has sometimes considered the poorer classes, immigrant groups, or even all women as impressionable! Concerns about the harmful and corrupting nature of media on consumers, particularly youth, have been recorded since at least the time of the Greeks and Romans. In some of his writings, Plato appears to have cautioned against the corrupting influence of plays and poetry on youth, although as he often spoke in dialogues, it’s possible he was merely repeating common folk wisdom of the day (Griswold, 2003). Plato has the distinction of being the first person to argue that youth can’t distinguish fact from fiction (a belief contradicted in more recent research; see Woolley & Van Reet, 2006). His mentor, Socrates, is reported to have been suspicious even of the alphabet (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967) as a source of harm. Imagine a world with no alphabet!

Probably the most dramatic example of brutal mass media would be the Roman gladiatorial games, which featured public executions, fights between men and wild animals, and combats between trained gladiators. The Romans even featured plays in which criminals were killed to make the death scenes more realistic (Coleman, 1990; Wells, 1995). That’s taking method acting to an extreme. The games were hugely popular and thought of as one means of placating the vast, poor population of Rome who were otherwise unruly and discontent. Curiously, the Romans seemed to advocate the games using a theoretical approach we would now think of as routine activities...
theory (Cohen & Felson, 1980). Routine activities theory suggests that, whatever the short-term effects of media might be, violent media can nonetheless reduce crime simply by keeping aggressive individuals busy. We discuss some recent research on movie and video game violence regarding routine activities theory when we come to those chapters, but the Romans saw the games as one method to keep the poor citizens of Rome from rioting! Whether this worked or not, early Christian theorists such as Tertullian (200 CE) and Augustine (397 CE), as well as pagan orators (e.g., Seneca, 64 CE), worried that the games would have a negative moral impact on spectators.

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, these vicious gladiatorial games, already on the decline due to the Christianization of the Roman Empire, became a thing of the past entirely. This didn’t end people’s prurient interest in media. Western literature, including Beowulf (approximately 8th–9th century), Geoffrey of Monmouth’s History of the Kings of England (1138, featuring the King Arthur legends), Dante’s Inferno (1302), and the plays of Shakespeare, continued to demonstrate ongoing human interest in subjects related to violence, sex, and everything else naughty. The reemergence of popular plays in the later Middle Ages represents an essential return to the Grecian variant on mass media in the form of public performances of theater. The Roman gladiatorial games were a permanent thing of the past, yet they were replaced by the popular jousting tourneys. These battles weren’t meant to be fought to the death (although deaths did happen) but still featured bloody combat between trained warriors. Public outcries regarding jousting in particular came from the Roman Catholic Church (National Jousting Association, 2008), although these concerns appeared to focus on a variety of issues, from the potential for loss of life to their distracting knights from the Crusades. Despite attempts to ban the sport, it remained popular into the 17th century. This same time period also saw the popularity of public executions (which were considered public entertainment) attended by families and at which food vendors often sold their wares.
As the Middle Ages slowly moved into the Renaissance, a new source of controversy arose: the Christian Bible. Like many religious texts, the Bible contains a rather considerable amount of gratuitous sex and violence. But this wasn’t the controversy in question. Blame Gutenberg: His invention of movable type in 1450 allowed for mass printing, potentially taking the Bible out of the Catholic monasteries that had been faithfully copying it for centuries. Because of religious reformation during this period and dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church in some areas, a market quickly emerged for non-Latin translations of the Bible. Throughout most of Christian history, the Bible was only available in Latin or perhaps Greek, languages that were inaccessible to the average person even if, by some miracle, he or she could read at all. Most people had to take their priest’s word for what the Bible said. Translating the Bible into local languages had been banned as early as 1199 by Pope Innocent III in response to several heretical movements. Now a Bible translated into English by William Tyndale in 1524 came under criticism for allegedly mistranslating several words in order to promote anticlericalism (i.e., anti-Roman Catholicism). Tyndale paid the ultimate price for this transgression and was burned at the stake (Daniell, 2004). The Roman Catholic Church worried that these Bibles translated into local languages would promote heresy by convincing people to reject the Church and, instead, seek an individualized relationship with God.

The rise of mass media as we know it today was driven by Gutenberg’s invention of the movable type printing press in 1450. The printing press made it possible to mass produce books, making literature cheaper to buy than the hand-printed books of the past. Slowly, and as literacy increased, books were produced more and more often to appeal to the tawdry tastes of the mass media market. By the 16th century, “true crime” books began to appear, gruesomely detailing criminal events as well as the brutal executions of the offenders (Trend, 2007). These books appear to have satisfied both a public attraction to violent depictions as well as providing a sense of justice and warning to would-be offenders.
During the same time period, some complained that popular folk songs presented criminals as heroes (Pearson, 1983).

The prototypical novel emerged in the 17th century. Among the first examples of a popular novel was *Don Quixote* by Cervantes. The book depicted a country gentleman who descends into fantasy, believing he is a medieval knight who goes chasing windmills thinking they are giants. Though certainly popular then as now, *Don Quixote* was met with a certain disdain about the quality and impact of chivalric romance novels (Kirschenbaum, 2007). By the 18th century, we begin to see the introduction of the modern novel (Trend, 2007). This time period also sees a new influx of concerns regarding the impact of literature on reader morality. In 1776, one Joseph Hanway, an English philanthropist, stated that newspapers and other “debasing amusements” were responsible for, as he put it, “the host of thieves which of late years has invaded us” (Cumberbach, 2007). Samuel Richardson’s novel *Pamela*, published in 1741, was condemned for its “lewd” content and for assaulting the principles of virtue (Trend, 2007). During the 19th century, many social commentators particularly worried about the impact of novels on women readers who, it was thought, could not adequately distinguish reality from fiction (Kirschenbaum, 2007).

During the 19th century, the potential to sell large quantities of literature to a mass audience that was increasingly literate became obvious. “Dime novels” were the answer: cheap oftentimes lurid works with dubious literary value, at least according to the scions of society. Similarly, “penny dreadfuls,” which looked a lot like early comic books, begin to emerge, many of them hinging upon violent or horror themes. *Varney the Vampire* (see Prest, 1847, for an archived copy) was one of the early popular stories, following the exploits of a vampire who found himself to be loathsome. Not surprisingly, given these works’ content, social commentators worried about the impact of these penny dreadfuls, particularly on young boys among whom they were popular (Cumberbach, 2007). By this point, we begin to see that one factor that emerges in debates about media is the distinction between “high” and “low” culture,
with elements of “low” culture (e.g., dime novels, penny dreadfuls) typically blamed for social problems.

Thus we see that culturally “elite” groups such as politicians and academics, were historically most inclined to see problems with media, particularly “low” culture media (Trend, 2007). Very often, such dialogues implied that society was “better off” or purer before the introduction of some form of “low” culture media, and that this new media has ruined culture or made society less moral.

This is something I refer to as the “Goldilocks Effect”: Each generation of elders believes that the generation before them was too conservative on the issue of media, but the generation of youth after them are out of control and without moral limits. In other words, each generation thinks it got media “just right.” More on that later, but for now it should be noted, however, that archaeological evidence suggests that violence was rather common in even prehistorical societies devoid of modern media (McCall & Shields, 2008), and we appear to be living now in one of the most peaceful epochs on record (Pinker, 2011).

Such data was probably less clear in the 19th century, however, and, regardless, commentators tended to worry about new trends in media sparking disastrous social downward spirals (Trend, 2007). The commentary tended to worry particularly about non-elite groups, such as low socioeconomic status (SES), working-class children and immigrant groups. These groups, along with women, were seen as particularly vulnerable to media effects. Scientific and medical terms were adopted more and more often by social critics to equate their moral beliefs with scientific reasoning and impart greater immediacy to the potential problems of media. Media regulation and censorship became more than a moral issue, but rather a public health crisis allegedly on par with smoking and lung cancer (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

Despite the increasing use of scientific (or pseudoscientific) lingo in cultural debates, true efforts to adopt protoscientific methodology for media effects only began during the early film era. The advent of film dovetailed with other moral issues of the early 20th century, including sexuality, temperance, and immigration, as
well as a liberalizing trend in society (Trend, 2007). Thus, anti-media crusades fit into a general pattern of moral crusading for multiple causes in the early 20th century. It has been noted that these moral crusades were rooted in a sense of “inerrancy” vis-à-vis a particular set of beliefs. Some groups held that their moral beliefs were “factual,” and those of other groups were wrong (Sherkat & Ellison, 1997).

In the early days of film, filmmakers began to experiment, not surprisingly, with a variety of objectionable material, including violence, sex, and nudity (see, for example, the frontal nudity of Hedy Lamarr in 1933’s *Ecstasy*). During the 1930s the first social science efforts to explore the adverse effects of film began. The Payne Fund studies (Blummer, 1933) purported to find a link between movie viewing and delinquency. Arguably, these Payne Fund studies began with the conclusion that films were bad for youth and set about trying to find evidence for that belief (a tendency that often seems to continue into modern social science on media). Setting the stage for debates that would occur over the next century, critics of the Payne Fund studies noted the lack of control groups, difficulties in validly measuring aggression, and sampling problems as limiting their usefulness (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Taking a blank-slate approach on child development, the Payne Fund studies provided considerable fuel to the fire of belief that media exposure could harm youth.

Nonetheless, whatever their weaknesses or agenda, the Payne Fund studies were used by the U.S. government to pressure the film industry to self-censor. Prior to the 20th century, little censorship in media existed in the United States. That changed as mass media became more popular, with bannings of some books, such as *Tropic of Cancer*, and efforts to pressure other media industries to clean up their content. Despite the First Amendment, it wasn’t entirely clear what the government could and couldn’t legislate concerning censorship, particularly when the government declared a pressing public health interest (whether real or not). In an effort to head off looming government censorship, the motion picture industry established the Hays Code in 1930.
Graphic depictions of violence, the techniques of murder or other crimes, smuggling and drug trafficking, the use of liquor (unless required by the plot), revenge, safecracking, train robberies, adultery (which was not to be presented as an attractive option), interracial relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, nudity, and even “lustful kissing” were all forbidden or strictly controlled under the Hays Commission.

Despite a considerable self-censorship regime in the movie industry, concerns regarding the impact of media on youth resurfaced in the 1950s. Films such as Rebel Without a Cause (1955) seemed to be marketed more and more toward a younger audience and seemed to promote rebelliousness (Trend, 2007). Concern over the insidious effects of media became part of a culture paranoid over communism and other “anti-American” influences.

During the 1950s, comic books took center stage of the controversy. Many comic books of this time were horror or crime focused and included graphic, if cartoonish, depictions of violence and scantily clad women. Naturally, such comic books were a hit with young males. One psychiatrist, Dr. Frederic Wertham, published a book called Seduction of the Innocent (1954/1996), which claimed that comic books were a major cause of juvenile crime. During testimony before Congress, Wertham also claimed that comic books promoted homosexuality, as characters such as Batman and Robin were secretly gay. Although Wertham’s book was anecdotal rather than based on empirical research, it touched off considerable concern, which ultimately came to the attention of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Rather than risk open censorship, the comic book industry, like the movie industry, volunteered to rigidly self-regulate, a move which doomed many comic books with violent content.

Wertham himself, through the lens of history, has gradually come to represent not so much a righteous battle against corrupting media but overzealous moral crusading. In one recent analysis, Tilley (2012) argued that he manipulated his own data and
misrepresented or altered the biographies of adolescents he interviewed to support his thesis that comic books were damaging.

The Rise of Television

The great thing about moral debates on media is, just as people get used to one form of media, something new comes along to push the envelope. By the 1950s and 1960s, this was television. Television ownership became prevalent during the 1950s (although it had been introduced the decade before). With television, the potential for visual mass media to reach audiences increased considerably. Radio had already been popular, and some radio shows included violence, although this was narrated, not viewed directly. Television, like movies, was a visual media foremost; unlike movies, television could be viewed every day, for hours on end, for practically no cost at all. The potential for viewers to greatly increase their diet of mass media was apparent. Shows with violent content, including westerns such as Bonanza and Have Gun, Will Travel and crime shows such as Dragnet, quickly became popular. As the advent of widespread television consumption in the 1950s was followed, in the United States, by a precipitous rise in violent crime a decade and a half later, many commentators were given to wondering whether there might be a causal link between the two (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Centerwall, 1989). Yet this rise in violent crime appears to have been fairly unique to the United States, with other countries introducing violent television seeing no similar violent-crime rises. The example of the island of St. Helena provided an interesting opportunity to test the effects of introducing television. St. Helena received television access for the first time in 1995. Aggression in schoolchildren was tracked for the period just before and just after television’s introduction (Charlton, Gunter, & Coles, 1998). Rather surprisingly, aggression among school children decreased in the 2-year period following the introduction of television. Nonetheless, a more long-term follow-up might produce different results.
Although early television welcomed violent content, sex was different. The introduction of sexuality on television was slow. This can be witnessed in viewing clips of some of the 1950s television classics such as *I Love Lucy*. Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz were married in real life and played the main married couple in the show. Despite this, when shown in their bedroom, they slept in separate twin beds and dressed in pajamas that looked like snowsuits. Even something as simple as a flush toilet could not be depicted in early television because of perceived audience sensibilities!

Beginning in the 1960s, crime in the United States (which ultimately declined again beginning in the 1990s; see Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1951–2012) began to rise precipitously, giving fuel to concerns linking television to societal violence. Criminologists tend to agree that this rise in violence was due to multiple factors including civil strife and the counterculture movement, the Vietnam War, racial disparities, a downturn in the economy, increased poverty, and increased availability and trade in illicit drugs, among other factors (see Savage, 2008). But the rise in violence in the 1960s appeared to correlate with the introduction of television the decade before. Was it possible that a generation brought up on television had become significantly more violent than previous generations? Thinking so involved ignorance of an entire history of vicious human behavior (Pinker, 2011), but following on the relatively peaceful years of the late 1940s and 1950s, it was tempting to see a correlation.

As such, social science interests in media effects that had rather died off after the Payne Fund studies increased once again. Media effects research particularly saw a lift following the “bobo doll” studies of Albert Bandura (1965). In brief, these studies had children watch adults in filmed sequences engage in a series of aggressive acts against a bobo doll (an inflatable toy doll designed to be boxed or hit). So, for instance, the models would sit on the bobo doll and punch it in the nose or whack it with a mallet. The researchers then irritated the children by showing them a host of toys that they were not allowed to play with before
bringing them to the test room with the bobo doll. Children who had seen an adult model aggressive behaviors were more likely to engage in similar behaviors. Although the bobo doll studies are not media violence studies per se, they purport to demonstrate that aggression can be imitated by children.

However, the bobo doll studies have also been demonstrated to have serious limitations (Gauntlett, 2005). First, the effects appear to be small overall and evaporate very quickly. Second, the “aggression” in the study was directed at an object, not another person, and it remains unclear if the studies’ results can be generalized to real-life aggression against people. Related to that is the concern that the entire situation is contrived; after all, one might ask, what else are you supposed to do with a bobo doll other than hit it? Third, it is unclear whether the children were necessarily more motivated to engage in aggression in general, as opposed to mimicking specific aggressive acts. In other words, overall aggressive behaviors may not have changed much, but the style of the aggressive behaviors might have been altered because of the novel kinds of aggressive behaviors presented. Fourth, it is unclear that the children were necessarily motivated by aggression, as opposed to aggressive play or even the desire to please the adult experimenter. Children are quite used to being given instructions by adults, and they may arguably have simply viewed the models (who were adults) as instructors telling them what to do. In other words, the children may have even believed that they might be scolded or punished if they didn’t follow the model’s lead. Last, Bandura (1965) found that showing the model being punished for attacking the bobo doll decreased modeled behaviors in child participants. Yet the punishments themselves appeared to involve considerable aggressive behavior. As described in the original text (Bandura, 1965, p. 591):

For children in the model-punished condition, the reinforcing agent appeared on the scene [this occurs after the children watched the model hit the bobo doll] shaking his finger
menacingly and commenting reprovingly, “Hey there you big bully. You quit picking on that clown. I won’t tolerate it.” As the model drew back he tripped and fell, and the other adult sat on the model and spanked him with a rolled up magazine while reminding him of his aggressive behavior. As the model ran off, cowering, the agent forewarned him, “If I catch you doing that again, you big bully, I’ll give you a hard spanking. You quit acting that way.”

From this description it is reasonable to wonder what we can conclude when it appears that children are willing to imitate aggression against an object, but viewing violence against an actual person inhibits their aggression. However one interprets the meaningfulness of the bobo doll studies, there is little doubt that they had considerable impact on the media effects debate.

The Telecommunications Act of 1996 mandated a new technology, the V-chip, into televisions. The intent of the V-chip was, in the words of President Bill Clinton, who signed the act into law, “handing the TV remote control back to America’s parents so that they can pass on their values and protect their children” (CNN, 1996). Television producers were also required to develop a code for objectionable content that would warn parents about the shows on television. They could then use the V-chip to block shows with content they considered objectionable. The V-chip became something of a flop, however, and is used by only a minority of parents (15% according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). It’s unclear why the V-chip, trumpeted as empowering parents, has been met with such apathy. Many have complained that the ratings for content used for television are difficult to decipher, and, although televisions come with instructions on using the V-chip, many consumers may fail to read them. Other parents may simply feel they don’t need a chip to help them regulate their children’s television viewing. A follow-up Kaiser Family Foundation (2007) study found that the majority of parents felt competent in monitoring their children’s viewing habits, whether or not they used the V-chip. Perhaps not surprisingly, the television ratings have been condemned by the
conservative activist group Parents Television Council (2007) for being too lenient regarding violent and sexual content.

**The Filthy Fifteen**

Roughly during this same time, music came under scrutiny. For at least a decade, with the counter-culture movement of the 1960s and the advent of heavy metal music in the early 1970s, music lyrics began to involve more sexually explicit language, violence, and profanity. By the 1980s, some politicians felt that things had gotten too extreme.

The result was the founding of the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) by several women connected to Washington politicians. The movement was particularly associated with Tipper Gore, wife of future Vice President (and then Senator) Al Gore. The PMRC was successful in pressing for congressional hearings on music lyrics in the mid 1980s, claiming such lyrics were damaging to youth. The PMRC also released a “Filthy Fifteen” list of bands and songs they felt were particularly egregious. On the list were acts ranging from Prince to Madonna to Judas Priest to Twisted Sister to Cyndi Lauper. For instance, Lauper’s song “She Bop” was included on the list, because the “bopping” in question referred to masturbation. Apparently the PMRC was concerned Lauper would get teens running around masturbating like crazy, as if they needed Lauper’s help for that. Most of these rock acts are, 30 years later, considered “classic” or tame.

Using the same threat of censorship waged against the movie, comic book, and television industries, the PMRC pressured the recording industry to provide a Parental Advisory sticker on albums or songs with explicit lyrics. Whether the advent of this sticker was a success is debatable. Certainly it provided content labels for parents, but arguably it also provided a “forbidden fruit” incentive for youth to be attracted to controversial media. This may, if anything, have accelerated the profanity in music as controversy is profitable and there’s little evidence to suggest youth today hear fewer explicit lyrics than in the past.
The Age of Video Games

Video games as a new medium entered the fray in the late 1970s with the popularity of arcade games and the release of the Atari 2600 home console in 1977. Most early games were quite primitive and highly pixilated, although person-on-person violence did begin to emerge fairly quickly. In arcades, the game *Death Race* (1976), which involved driving a car over humanoid “gremlins,” had earlier raised considerable controversy. On personal computers and game consoles, games such as *Swashbuckler* (1982), *Chiller* (1986), *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981), and *Spy vs. Spy* (1984) began introducing person-on-person violence, some rather surprisingly graphic. Controversy emerged pretty quickly with the surgeon general claiming in the early 1980s that video games were a leading cause of family violence (Cooper & Mackie, 1986).

Video games weren’t the only interactive media to come under scrutiny at this time. The paper-and-pencil, role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (see Cardwell, 1994), which involved playing as knights or wizards, led some to speculate that the game was so immersive it might lead to aggression, suicide, or psychosis. Little research actually examined the potential impact of *Dungeons and Dragons*, although there appears to be little evidence that the emergence of the game touched off a youth violence wave. Very likely the game took so long to play (hours for any given session) that experimental studies of the game were simply not feasible.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a new class of video games with better graphics and increased person-on-person violence. These included *Street Fighter* (1987), *Mortal Kombat* (1992), *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and, finally, *Doom* (1993). Games such as these included new levels of graphic, person-on-person violence that were not possible in the earlier pixilated games.

Fears about such games promoting real-life violence appeared realized following the Columbine High School massacre of 1999. Two adolescents, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, killed 12 students and a teacher before committing suicide. It was widely
reported in the news media that Harris and Klebold had been fans of the violent shooter game *Doom*.

By this time, Congress had already held hearings on video game violence. Consistent with previous hearings on other media, these hearings prodded the video game industry to form the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) to rate all video games for violent and other potentially offensive content. The ESRB content labels appear on all commercially available games. The ESRB ratings system has actually been rated as one of the best media ratings systems by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC; 2007). Not all have been happy with the ESRB ratings system, however. At about the same time the FTC praised the ESRB system, the antimedia advocacy group National Institute of Media and the Family (NIMF) claimed that the ESRB standards were not strict enough (2007). The ESRB shot back that it was the NIMF report that was flawed and inconsistent with the FTC’s generally supportive appraisal of the ESRB (Gamepolitics.com, 2007). The NIMF has since ceased to operate.

As one issue for debates on video game and other violent media, the crime waves of the 1970s and 1980s began to dissipate in the early 1990s (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1951–2012), including among youth (Childstats.gov, 2015). School shootings, despite receiving increased attention, were also on the decline (see also Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008, for university crime data), although mass shootings remain at a steady rare level (Fox & DeLateur, 2014). It has been observed that, by the 1990s, almost all young males play violent games (Griffiths & Hunt, 1995), questioning the meaningfulness of reported “links” between violent video games and some school shooters. Also, regarding school shootings, in a report by the United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education (2002), school shooters appeared to have fairly average to low-average interest in violent media, and that an interest in violent media was not a good predictor of school shootings.

Nonetheless, horrifying mass shootings continue to fuel debates about violent video games. The 2012 shooting at Sandy
Hook Elementary School, wherein the shooter, Adam Lanza, was rumored to be a heavy player of violent video games, reawakened public debates regarding such games. However, the final investigation report by the state of Connecticut revealed that he was more interested in nonviolent video games such as *Dance, Dance Revolution* (State’s Attorney for the Judicial District of Danbury, 2013).

As the new millennium unfolds, media of all sorts remain controversial. We are probably seeing an increased liberalization of sexuality, violence, profanity, and just about everything else, while technological innovations continue at a rapid pace. New media, such as social media, have begun to create new concerns. With such a heavy rate of technological progress, it is unlikely that debates over media effects will diminish in the short term. In the following chapters we look at some of those media and the debates that focus on them.

**REFERENCES**


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