

**CONSTRUCTING THE PARADIGM OF VIOLENCE:  
Mass Media, Violence and Youth**

**Jock Young  
Professor of Sociology, Middlesex University  
Distinguished Professor of Criminology,  
John Jay College, City University of New York**

## **CONSTRUCTING THE PARADIGM OF VIOLENCE: Mass Media, Violence and Youth**

"It has been something of a cliché to observe that despite many decades of research and hundreds of studies, the connections between people's consumption of the mass media have remained persistently elusive. Indeed researchers have enjoyed an unusual degree of patience from their scholarly and more public audiences." (David Gauntlett, 1998, p.1)

David Gauntlett's admonishment at the beginning of his excellent article, 'Ten Things Wrong with the 'Effects' Model' is echoed by other authoritative summaries of the literature. Thus Sonia Livingstone notes that "despite the volume of research, the debate about media effects ... remains unresolved" (1996, p.306) and Rob Reiner in his meticulous survey of research for *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* notes that:

"the meagre conclusion from the expenditure of countless research hours and dollars is primarily a testimony to the limitations of empirical social science ... because the armoury of possible research techniques for assessing directly the effects of media images on crime is sparse and suffers from evident and long-recognized limitations" (1997, p.214)

Thus he notes, very importantly, that the results are a product of these limitations rather than a simple endorsement of the media having little effect, adding as a critical caveat: "although it is often interpreted by ...libertarian or professionally interested defenders of media images as a clean bill of health for such images" (*ibid.*).

It is not my intention here to closely examine the limitations of effects theory. Suffice it to say that the faulty research design is frequent, correlation is often confused with causality, definitions of pro-social and anti-social behaviour are arbitrary, generalisations from the 'artificial' situation of laboratory or school based survey to 'natural' lived situations are regularly made with somewhat abandon and, anyway, the results are frequently inconsistent, confused and often slight. Above all, there is an assumption of simple and mechanical determinism which ignores human reflexivity. After all, exposure to media violence can lead to a person becoming a campaigner against media violence just as it can encourage those who seek justifications for their own violence.

Furthermore, there is a persistent conservative tendency, both amongst many politicians and academics, to explain violence as due wholly to the mass media rather than to the wide range of social factors (eg gross inequality, poverty, decrepit neighbourhoods, etc.) which impact upon people (see Cohen and Young, 1981; Gauntlett, 1998). This ignoring of structural factors is complemented by a neglect of the widespread cultural factors conducive to violence. Moreover, effects are studied as if they were the result of discrete atoms of violence rather than part of narratives - paradigms if you want - of where violence is permissible and impermissible (see Mooney and Young, 2002).

### **The Paradigm Approach to Media Effects**

In *The Manufacture of News*, Stan Cohen and I pointed to the two major theoretical approaches to the study of mass media effects being what we term the manipulative and the market models. Here we have two diametrically different conceptions of human nature and social action: the first stressing stimulus-response, and determination, the second emphasising free choice, and rationality. And if the first overemphasises the effects of media, the second underemphasises it, seeing it as a result of previous attitudes: a market choice because of pre-existing attitudes and preferences. Our aim was to break out of this polarity.

The paradigm approach to mass media effects allows for the fact that human beings invariably interpret and transform the information they receive yet which does not deny that incoming information has some effect, albeit often in ways which are indirect. That is, a position which allows for effect but is extremely distant from the notion of simple stimulus and response. From this perspective the mass media frequently provide a paradigm or perspective which situates and contextualises rather than directly affecting, in a one-to-one manner. Thus, in the case of violence, it does not cause aggression so much as provide a script or narrative which suggests when violence is appropriate, against whom, for what reasons and with what effects, together with images of those against

whom violence is permitted and prohibited. Such narratives have the following dimensions:

1. **Setting the Frame: The Meta-narrative** Here the perspective is not so much the content of the media, nor the particular fictional narrative *per se* but the meta-narrative which the media provides. For example, what it says in terms of violence as a means of solving problems, the efficacy of violence in this task and, most importantly, the norm of using violence as a response in the first instance.
2. **The Roles in the Narrative: Information Stock and Stereotype:** What roles the narrative provides by gender, ethnicity, class and age. For example, what roles women are given, how they are portrayed in terms of class and demeanour.
3. **The Narrative of Violence:** What is the narrative which the media provides in terms of reasons and justifications for violence?
4. **Desensitisation: Adiaphorization of Narrative:** To what extent over time does the media desensitise the audience to violence? How does it affect their views on the use of serial violence in other contexts, eg in war, aerial bombing, etc. To what extent does adiaphorization occur? (the stripping of human relationships - in this case violence - from any moral significance)? (see Z Bauman, 1995)
5. **Moral Panic: Incorporation in a Public Narrative:** In this instance we widen our perspective out and reflect how the debate about the narratives of violence contained within the media itself becomes incorporated in a narrative about violence in our society.
6. **Shared and Shaped Narratives:** Modern research on media effects stresses the shared communal nature of much media intake rather than the notion of impact upon a solitary individual (for television, see Morley, 1986).

Video and video-game use is similarly very often a collective pursuit so the narrative is jointly interpreted.

Let us start with the definitions and focus of violence commonplace in effects studies. First of all there is an overwhelming focus on fictional violence - news items, despite constituting a significant proportion of violent footage, are excluded. The regular news bulletins concerning our interventions in such conflicts, whether from Afghanistan, Israel, Bosnia or whatever trouble spot in the globe, which greet us daily are ignored. This 'legitimate violence' which is justified by politicians and within the media as 'pro-social', is a major public source of knowledge about violence and its justifications. And these images reflect the reality of youthful violence: young men sporting AK47's, driving tanks, firing artillery. Ruth Jamieson (1999), in her pioneering work on the criminology of war, points out how the perpetrators of legitimate violence are in exactly the same social category of people as those who commit illegitimate violence and are the usual subjects of conventional criminology. That is, young, working class males, often with a high ethnic composition (witness the US and UK armies). A significant proportion of violence in the mass media experienced by youth is, therefore, portrayed as legitimate violence and the main actors are youths like themselves. If we now turn to fictional depictions of violence let us note that in film, video and in video games, military stories are frequent. These are all in a parallel fashion to the newsroom depiction of the military, centred around a narrative of legitimate violence. Further, the vast majority (nearly all) of these depictions involve the triumph of legitimate violence ('The Good Guys', The Heroes) over illegitimate violence ('The Bad Guys', The Villains). That is, as Gauntlett points out, anti-social behaviour is invariably punished. Indeed it is only in factual, i.e. newsroom, depictions of violent crime that lack of punishment is seen to occur. Yet media studies would ignore all of the factual depictions of violence and register each aggressive act in fiction as in essence anti-social. This is wrong in valence (violence is always divided into legitimate and illegitimate - some is approved, some is disapproved) but most fundamentally underestimates the likely impact of such a message. For as part of a *narrative* it extols 'legitimate' violence as a major method of solving the problem of 'illegitimate' violence and connects up such condonable violence

with the wider cultural approval. Even the violence of Heroes outside of the law is depicted as pro-social. Indeed this is a major theme of the thriller genre (eg the work of Elmore Leonard, George Pelecanos, Micky Spillane etc., see Palmer, 1973). If we concentrate merely on each discrete act of violence as the effects researchers do, and ignore their place within the narrative, we would neglect that much of the violence is given a strong positive valence, whilst the rest is the justification for the violence of the former. What the media provides is a paradigm which consists of *binaries*, good-evil, hero-villain, violence which is necessary to ensure the good prevails, and violence which is out of order. Such a *paradigm of violence* has obvious resonance in the depictions of the world which occur in speeches of politicians such as George W Bush (and his fight against 'the axis of evil') and Reagan (in his opposition to the 'evil empire'). It does not advocate violence *per se* (which is what the media researchers are obsessed with in their search for gratuitous violence) but rather it provides *vocabularies of motive* for when violence is appropriate. Indeed it is the 'bad guys' who engage in this gratuitous violence, the existence of which conjures up the necessity of righteous violence.

Such an analysis involving a paradigm of violence moves far beyond effects theory. It suggests that the narratives of violence which connect widely across our culture are available to justify violence and also (in the aid of the 'pro-social') to justify why the law should be broken. They are there to be mobilised by groups who, because of economic and ontological reasons, face strains which give rise to subcultures liable to violence. They do not cause violent behaviour, they help justify it. The literature on subcultural theory is replete with the circumstances which give rise to violence, particularly with regards to youth (the classic is Cloward and Ohlin, 1960). Of relevance here is David Matza's (1964) famous revision of subcultural theory and his notion of techniques of neutralisation. He postulates that delinquency occurs not because of a subculture of delinquency centred around violence, but because youth neutralise the rules in certain situations (eg 'appeal to higher loyalties'). As was noted in *The New Criminology*,

"Techniques of neutralization are similar to C. Wright Mill's 'vocabulary of motives' (1940). They are phrases or linguistic utterances used by the deviant to justify his action. Their importance lies in the fact that they are not merely *ex post facto* excuses or rationalizations invented for the authorities' ears, but rather phrases which actually facilitate or motivate the commission of a deviant action by neutralizing a pre-existing normative constraint." (Taylor, *et al*, 1973, p.176).

It should be noted that such a paradigm of violence facilitates such a process and indeed the popular genre which justifies illegality in order to maintain the greater good, as epitomised by the thriller but also encompassing other literary narratives, precisely centres around techniques of neutralisation.

The close relationship between the frustrations of those low in the social structure and the narratives of the media is vividly documented in Carl Nightingale's brilliant ethnography of the black Philadelphian ghetto, *On The Edge*:

"Whether the amount of violence in films and TV shows have contributed to the recent rise in homicides is uncertain, but some of the ethical codes of aggression in [the] neighbourhood clearly have depended on the mainstream culture of violence for legitimacy ... boys' efforts to compensate for humiliation and frustration owe some of their aggressive qualities to their identification with the heroes and values of the mainstream American culture of violence."

And he adds, "Indeed, TV and movie violence has nearly completely replaced the messages and ways of expressing and concealing pain that have been offered by African-American folklore ..." (1993, p.168).

He points to the great attractions of the mass media to the black population. In 1990 the average African-American household has television on eleven hours per day and, although only 12% of the US population, make up one-quarter of the movie-going public. The ghetto poor in Philadelphia queue up for the latest movies, the youngsters discuss avidly each act of violence in the movie, they identify with the heroes. Nightingale adds further to our notion of the paradigm of violence. He notes how the films focus on the main male characters, who

derive their moral authority by "a glorified ability to play it alone and to live outside the realms of humdrum emotional vulnerability" (*ibid.*, p.171). Further,

"their commitment to the good is often signaled by a celebration of these men's lack of commitment to intimacy, particularly to women, whom they sometimes treat as objects of sexual conquest, and by their willingness to fight for a cause. In turn, their violence often acquires a moral admirability precisely because it is portrayed as the most effective way to cut through red tape and achieve desirable ends." (*ibid.*, pp.171-2)

Finally, the research was conducted at the time of the Gulf War and Nightingale noted widespread support for the policies of Bush I. And, of course, it is recruits from such backgrounds who disproportionately swell the ranks of the infantry and front line soldiers.

Let us turn now to the context of this paradigm of violence. What is strange about the studies of the relationship between the mass media and audience, the researchers into media effects - would seem to believe that the context is constant - that is the nature of the media and the social situation of the audience remains in some sort of steady state. Thus decades of research are accumulated in the chimeric pursuit of a general 'scientific' formula of media effects ignoring the fact that the background on which the generalisations are graded is moving. In reality *both* the mass media and the audience change dramatically. The mass media changes both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively the level of saturation of the various media increases if not just in the case of television in a media succession from film and radio, but film itself (via video) finds a substantially increased audience and radio, far from diminishing, increases its listeners. Video games enter the arena for the first time and become a major part of mediated experience. The amount of time which the audience gives to the mass media increases remarkably. In 1999, for example, the average person in England and Wales watched 26 hours of television and listened to 19 hours of radio every week. That is 40% of their waking life was spend in watching TV and listening to the radio - equivalent to 60% of their free time if they were in work. And these figures, of course, would be considerably higher if one talked about youth and working class youth in particular.

Not only has the quantity of media usage increased, also the level of violence covered by the media increases dramatically - in part a response to wooing a youthful audience. Nightingale attempts to quantify these changes. He contrasts the gangster films of the thirties with the much greater number of killings of contemporary series, or the fifteen bullets fired in a whole year of the 1950s *Dragnet* with the multiple killings of today's shows. And more recently he cites Vincent Canby - the television reviewer's - informal survey where he noted that the hero of *Robocop* (1987) killed 32 people to return in *Robocop II* (1990) and massacre 81. *Rambo* killed nearly twice as many people in *Rambo III* (1989) as in the original (1985), whilst Bruce Willis' body count in *Die Hard* rose from 18 in its prototype (1988) to 264 in the spin-off (1990) (Nightingale, 1993, p.171).

Let us turn now to the qualitative change in the media. Here technological innovation plus audience demand have led to a fragmentation of the mass media into a multi-mediated complex - more types of media and more varieties of each media - replacing the colossus of the immediate post-war period (McRobbie and Thornton, 1995). This means that particular parts of the mass media carry extremely high amounts of violence and, once again, particularly those directed towards a youthful and working class audience.

Finally, the major new entry into the mass media complex is that of video games. There is a tendency to underestimate the Video Games industry just as there is to not take seriously its content and nature as a form of mass communication. In the UK in 2000, spending on computer games was £1.5bn, surpassing the film industry in that it exceeded the combined takings of movie video rental, sales and cinema box office. But most importantly, from the perspective of this article, it represents a new form of media - interactive rather than one-directional as in traditional mass media. Thus the individual interacts with the programme and can increasingly take a major part in shaping the ensuing narrative. Furthermore, the developments in video games are rapid with more increasingly complex and convincing virtual realities, with more sophisticated narratives and plot and with the ability to create ('sim') characters.

Ironically the critique of the deterministic theories of media effects which has dominated much of academic research has come from those who stress the role of audience choice, lack of passivity and resilience of attitudes. However, the degree of choice which video games increasingly offer shifts the debate, as one moves from media which are external to the person to those in which greater immersion occurs. Here the possibility of influence is surely greater as the distinction between virtual and actual reality begins to shrink.

Further, it should be noted that video games are in a period of rapid flux. Important developments are both literary and technological. On a literary level the narrative of video games moves closer and closer to that of film, so that there are plots, heroes, villains and elaborate urbanscapes. The interactive film is emerging (see Poole, 2002 who both recognises and regrets the convergence). On the technological level, characters can be illustrated by portraits of people known to the viewer and, in the future, camcorders connected to the game console can allow the viewer to be the hero on screen and the use of DVD may allow real video images to be displayed in the game. Thus Scott Bezzant, who is generally favourable towards the games, warns that for these reasons "*video games need to be carefully evaluated on a regular basis in the future to gain knowledge on the real potential, physical and psychological effects that may exist within them*" (2002, p.22, my italics).

But it is not only the media technology and variety which has been changing, it is also the audience that receives it. As we move into late modernity we have considerable changes occurring within the social structure. Jobs, once for life, become much less certain with more numerous career changes and even periods of unemployment. Family life, likewise, becomes subject to divorce, separation and re-marriage. There is a shift from massive manufacturing industries with communities built around them to service industries of lesser size. People move more frequently and community life to an extent breaks down (see Young, 1999; Young, 2001). The once solid narratives of work, marriage and community become broken and fragmented and, as Tony Giddens points out, people become disembedded from the social structure (Giddens, 1991). In such a situation the various subcultures which people form

with society, although still grounded in locality, become less contained by spatial proximity and the influence of those immediately around them. It is not that community and subculture becomes virtual - locality still has its powers - but the virtual component becomes of much greater significance. Figures within the mass media, within film and soap operas, become of greater significance, celebrities become orientation points and fictional narratives become almost at times more real than the broken narratives which surround us in reality. In these circumstances one is justified in speculating that particular groups may constitute subcultures where media referents figure greatly in their normative structure. We have already noted how Carl Nightingale describes the way in which African-American tradition and folklore, part of which depicted narratives of violence, has been supplanted, *particularly for young men*, by narratives from TV and the movies.

Although it is disadvantaged youth whom are both our major concern, here, and the most evidently affected by the paradigm of violence, it should be noted that they are not the only likely recipients of such a worldview. Thus, in terms of the mass media in general, it is worth speculating on the extent to which the wider audience begins to more readily accept the notion of the use of violence as a first or early response to problems in the outside world with all the likely political effects of this in terms of preparations for war. But it is with video games that one finds the most extraordinary isomorphy between virtuality and reality.

The technological developments in modern warfare bring about a remarkable distancing between the belligerent powers and their opponents. The enemy becomes a digital target upon a screen, the impact of weaponry is a blip on the monitor, too far away to be directly experienced, the actual horrific impact on human beings is not witnessed, whilst the 1<sup>st</sup> world warrior has much less chance of fatality than his 3<sup>rd</sup> world opponent. There are immediate parallels between the screen in the F1-11 fighter planes and those in the amusement arcade and in the kids bedroom. There is, of course, no implication of some magical functionalism or intent here. Simply that one of the most prevalent of modern entertainment involves an almost simulacrum of modern technological warfare and killing and, however unintentionally, involves a moral preparation

for such a process both for the perpetrators and the wider public. The fact that such games are part of training programmes of some fighter pilots merely underscores this, whilst the world watched the Gulf War on television screens, with all the thrills, yet lack of danger of a video game.

## **Conclusion**

I have argued that the pre-dominant model of media effects used in academic research has severe limitations and that these explain in part the contradiction and confusion in their results. Instead we argue for a theory which emphasises the narrative in which violence is placed rather than merely analysing violence into a series of disconnected bits. Such a paradigm theory (see Cohen and Young, 1981) is concerned with the narratives within which violence is seen as permissible and reprehensible and the manner in which heroes and villains are depicted. Such narratives cannot be restricted to fictional accounts but overlap and connect up with violence reported in the daily news, an area usually neglected by researchers. I argue that a particular *paradigm of violence* is socially constructed across these various media sites. Such a paradigm, I suggest, is not a simple construct which deterministically effects audiences, but it carries with it a vocabulary of motives which facilitates the emergence of violence in subcultures particularly of working class youth and the socially excluded.

As I noted in the second half of this essay, researchers frequently ignore the massive changes both in the complexity of the mass media and in the structure of the audience that have occurred in late modernity. The increased saturation of the media coupled with its multi-mediated nature directed to discrete audiences, increases the potency of its influence. Further, this is intensified by an audience whose daily narratives within their communities have been disembedded and to whom virtual, mediated realities have a considerably greater significance. Such a disembeddedness is particularly prevalent amongst youth low in the structure and amongst the socially excluded who, because of social inequality and poor living conditions, have the greatest feelings of relative deprivation and the resultant propensity to generate violent

subcultures. It is precisely these groups who have the greatest consumption of violent media and who are most liable to its influence.

JOCK YOUNG

January, 2003

## Bibliography

- Bauman, Z (1995), *Life in Fragments*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Bezzant, S (2002), 'Children and Video Games: What's the Fuss?', <http://www.scottbezzant.btinternet.co.uk/downloads/diseration.htm>
- Children Now (2001), *Fair Play? Violence, Gender and Race in Video Games*. Oakland, CA: Children Now
- Cloward, R and Ohlin, R (1960), *Delinquency and Opportunity*. Chicago: The Free Press
- Cohen, S and Young, J (1981), *The Manufacture of News* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). London: Constable; New York: Sage
- Cumberbatch, G; Maguire, A; Woods, S (2002), *Children and Video Games: An Exploratory Study*. Birmingham: Aston University Communications Group
- Gauntlett, D (1998), 'Ten Things Wrong with the "Effects Model"' in R Dickenson, R Harindranath and O Linné (eds) *Approaches to Audiences - A Reader*. London: Arnold
- Giddens, A (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Cambridge: Polity
- Gunter, B (1994), 'The Question of Media Violence' in J Bryant and D Zillman (eds.), *Media Effects*. Hillsday: NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Harris, J (2001), 'Overview of Research in Impact of Video Games'. London: Home Office
- Jamieson, R (1999), 'Genocide and the Social Production of Immorality', *Theoretical Criminology* 3(2), pp.131-146
- Livingstone, S (1996), 'On the Continuing Problem of Media Effects' in J Curran and M Guervitch (eds) *Mass Media and Society*. London: Arnold
- Matza, D (1964), *Delinquency and Drift*. New York: John Wiley
- McRobbie, A and Thornton, S (1995), 'Rethinking Moral Panic for Multimediated Social Worlds', *British Journal of Sociology*, 46(4) pp.559-74
- Mooney, J and Young, J (2002), 'Video Games: Overview of Research', *Video Games and Aggression*. Middlesex University: Centre for Criminology
- Morley, D (1986), *Family Television*. London: Routledge
- Nightingale, C (1993), *On The Edge*. New York: Basic Books

- Palmer, G (1973), 'Thrillers: The Deviant Behind the Consensus', in I Taylor and L Taylor (eds) *Politics and Deviance*. Harmondsworth: Penguin
- Poole, S (2002), *Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Video Games*. London: Fourth Estate
- Reiner, R (1997), 'Media Made Criminality' in M Maguire, R Morgan and R Reiner (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed). Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Taylor, I, Walton, P and Young, J (1973), *The New Criminology*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul
- Wright Mills, C (1940), 'Situating Actions and Vocabularies of Motive', *American Sociological Review*, 5(6), December
- Young, J (1999), *The Exclusive Society*. London: Sage
- Young, J (2001), 'Identity, Community and Social Exclusion' in R Matthews and J Pitts (eds), *Crime, Disorder and Community*. London: Routledge