The Media Violence Myth

By Richard Rhodes

I

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, pale, lean and a little goofy in a bad suit, struts the stage of a high school auditorium somewhere in Arkansas, his home state. He's a man on a mission, a smalltown Jimmy Swaggart, swooping and pausing and chopping the air. He's already scared the fresh-faced kids in the audience half to death, and the more scared they look, the wider he grins. "Before children learn to read," he lobs in one of his rhetorical flash grenades, "they can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality. That means everything they see is real for them. When a three year old, a four year old, a five year old sees someone on TV being shot, raped, stabbed, murdered, for them it's real. *It's real!* You might just as well have your little three year old bring a friend into the house, befriend that friend, and then *gut 'em and murder 'em right before their eyes"* — some of the kids in the audience wince — "as have them watch the same thing on TV, watch someone being brutally murdered on television. For them it's all real. Television is traumatizing and brutalizing our children at this horrendously young age."[1]

A retired U.S. Army lieutenant colonel with an M.Ed. in counseling, formerly an ROTC professor at the University of Arkansas, Grossman left the Army to dedicate himself to saving America from what he calls the "toxic waste" of "media violence" that is "being pumped into our nation and our children," the "electronic crack cocaine" of television and video games that he claims are "truly addictive." He's riding a bandwagon. Columbine turned it into a victory parade. Three days after Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold murdered thirteen of their schoolmates and then killed themselves, President Bill Clinton cited Grossman by name and endorsed Grossman's video-games-teach-kids-to-kill thesis in his weekly radio address. The Republicans have known since their log cabin days that the media are evil, but after Columbine, even Democrats like Connecticut's Joe Lieberman signed on. The American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the Surgeon General and other prestigious institutions have all endorsed the theory that violent media make kids violent. It's a solid cultural consensus.

Grossman speaks to hundreds of organizations every year, from schools and colleges to Rotary Clubs, police departments and veterans' groups. He's an effective speaker and polemicist. "We live in the most violent era in peacetime human history," he sets up his audiences. If someone reminds him that the murder rate was eight times as high in medieval Europe as it is in modern America, that murder rates have been declining steadily in the Western world for the past five hundred years,[2] he claims it's an illusion. "Medical technology saves ever more lives every year," he says. "If we had 1930s medical technology today, the murder rate would be ten times what it is." He claims that people are trying to kill people ten times as often as they used to do back when there were no police and no common access to courts of law, but that modern emergency medicine is masking the increase.

Now and again, as Grossman recites his litany, his narcissism breaks through. He's from Jonesboro, the Arkansas town where eleven-year-old Andrew Golden and thirteen-year-old Mitchell Johnson pulled their school fire alarm on March 24, 1998, and shot down fifteen schoolmates and a teacher as the victims exited the building into the schoolyard, killing five and wounding eleven. After the shootings, Grossman says, "the media were out interviewing everybody and his dog." Unable to resist a superlative, he adds: "We had the highest concentration of media per capita at any point in American history up to that time." He's already briefed his high-school audience about a study which he claims proves that when nations get television broadcasting, their murder rate doubles after a fifteen-year time lag (time for the little television-traumatized killers-in-training to reach adolescence). *Why don't you know that?* he challenges the kids. Because it isn't on television, he says: "If you ask the television industry about the link between violence on television and real-world violence, they'll lie."

With the media packed shoulder-to-shoulder in Jonesboro, Grossman thought that the mountain had finally come to Mohammed. But it wasn't to be. "They were interviewing everybody," he complains, "and here they've got this guy, this Grossman guy, who's this *expert* on violence, he wrote the book, he travels around the world training people. That would be a great interview, right? And I was on Canadian national TV, Australian national TV, I was on the BBC, newspapers and magazines around America were interviewing me." But not on U.S. national television. One of the major network news shows did seek him out, Grossman goes on. "'Wow,'" he claims they told him, "'here's a story we gotta get. We want to interview you.' I said, 'Great! I wanna be interviewed! But here's what it's all about: You've got to realize that every major medical and scientific body in the world has identified the fact that at least *50 percent* of the responsibility for violent crime lies on *your* shoulders.'" Long pause. The kids are with him. They already know the punch line. "They said, 'Well, thank you very much. If it's okay with you, we'd really rather not.'"

It's easy to believe that violence is getting worse: We hear about it all the time. It's easy to believe that mock violence in media is influencing behavior: What other violence do suburban kids see? Without question, popular culture is a lot more raucous than it used to be. It's a wild pageant, and it scares the culture police. But however many national leaders and prestigious institutions endorse the theory, it's a fraud. There's no evidence that mock violence in media makes people violent, and there's some evidence that it makes people more peaceful.

To start with, take a look at Col. Dave's claim about improved medical technology saving potential homicides. Of 1.5 million violent crimes in the U.S. in 1998, 17,000 were murders. Of the remaining number, according to the FBI, only 20,331 resulted in major injuries (the rest produced minor physical injuries or none at all). So if all the assault victims with major injuries had also died — improbable even with 1930's medicine — the 1998 U.S. murder rate would only have been double what it was — that is, would have been about 13 per 100,000 population rather than 6.3. But even 13 is well below the 23 per 100,000 murder rate of 13th-century England, the 45 per 100,000 of 15th-century Sweden, the 47 per 100,000 of 15th-century Amsterdam. We don't live in "the most violent era in peacetime human history"; we live in one of the least violent eras in peacetime human history.

Jib Fowles, a slight, handsome media scholar at the University of Houston at Clear Lake, worked his way through the media effects literature carefully and thoroughly when he was researching a book on the subject, mischievously titled *The Case* for *Television Violence*, which was published last year. Although Grossman and others are fond of claiming that there have been more than 2,500 studies showing a connection between violent media and aggressive behavior (the number actually refers to the entire bibliography of a major government report on the subject), the independent literature reviews Fowles consulted identified only between one and two hundred studies, the majority of them laboratory studies. Very few studies have looked at media effects in the real world, and even fewer have followed the development of children exposed to violent media over a period of years.

In typical laboratory studies, researchers require a control group of children to watch a "neutral" segment of a television show while a test group watches a segment which includes what the researchers believe to be violent content — an actor or a cartoon character pretending to assault other actors or cartoon characters. Both segments are taken out of context, although sometimes the children watch entire shows. After this exposure, the researchers observe the children at play together or interacting with toys to see if they behave in ways the researchers consider aggressive. Aggression may mean merely verbal aggression, or rough play such as pushing and shoving, or hitting. Hitting is a rare outcome in these experiments; the usual outcome is verbal banter or rough play. Since the researchers, by the very act of showing the tapes, have implicitly endorsed the behavior they require the kids to watch, and further endorse the kids' response by standing around counting aggressive acts rather than expressing disapproval or intervening as a teacher or parent might do, the experimental arrangement is not exactly neutral.

Even so, the results of their laboratory experiments have been inconclusive. In some studies "aggression" increased following the "violent" television viewing; but in other studies the control kids who watched a neutral segment were more aggressive afterward. Sometimes kids acted up more after watching comedy. Boys usually acted up more than girls, but sometimes it was the other way around. "In the majority of cases," two investigators who reviewed a large number of laboratory studies found, "there was an increase in negative behaviors in the postviewing interval for both aggressive and non-aggressive television material."[3] Contradictory results such as these prove, at best, no more than what everyone already knows:

that watching movies or television can stir kids up. They certainly don't prove that watching television makes children violent. They don't prove anything about the real world, Fowles argues, because they're nothing like the real world.

The best-known real-world study of the effect of television viewing on violent behavior is probably the one a Seattle psychiatrist named Brandon Centerwall reported in 1989. It's the basis for Grossman's claim in his standard stump speech that "with very few exceptions, anywhere in the world that television appears, within fifteen years the murder rate doubles." As usual, Grossman exaggerates; Centerwall's study limited its findings to three countries. To see if television influences the murder rate, the psychiatrist took advantage of a natural experiment: the fact that television broadcasting began in the U.S. and Canada after 1945 but not in South Africa, where the Afrikaans majority government banned it until 1975.

Centerwall graphed the murder rates for whites in Canada and the U.S. from 1945 to 1974 against television-set ownership and compared them to the white murder rate in South Africa during the same period. "White homicide rates remained stable [in South Africa]," he reports, but "in two control populations, Canadian and U.S. white homicide rates doubled following the introduction of television."[4] On the basis of this seemingly spectacular finding, Centerwall issued a call to arms in the prestigious *Journal of the American Medical Association* in 1992, spinning out his doubled murder rates into even more spectacular claims: "If, hypothetically, television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults."[5]

Two legal scholars at the University of California at Berkeley, Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins, refuted Centerwall's findings in a 1997 book, *Crime Is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America.* Zimring and Hawkins point out first that there are awkward problems with Centerwall's basic assumptions. How can television set ownership tell you anything about murder rates? Isn't television program *content* supposed to be the issue? And comparing white murder rates in the U.S. and Canada with white murder rates in South Africa, where whites represent fewer than five percent of the murder victims, is probably comparing apples and oranges.

Zimring and Hawkins tested Centerwall's theory more fundamentally by looking at homicide rates in four other industrial democracies — France, Germany, Italy and Japan. They found that the incidence of murder in those countries either remained more or less level (Italy) or actually declined (France, Germany and Japan) with increased television exposure. These counterexamples, they write, "*disconfirm* the causal linkage between television set ownership and lethal violence for the period 1945-1975."[6]

I sent Zimring and Hawkins' analysis to Centerwall for comment. He hadn't seen it before, but he told me he'd heard similar arguments. He was quick to offer reasons why he was right and the legal scholars were wrong. He said he interpreted the French and Italian graphs as confirming his theory — he thought they showed a longterm upward trend. Germany he acknowledged was different, "but since many other European countries that I didn't include in my paper had increased homicide rates, it doesn't bother me all that much." Japan isn't a Western country, Centerwall reminded me, arguing that "culture overrides television if it has a mechanism for dealing with physical aggression."

To explain the recent declines in homicide in the U.S. and England despite continuing and even increasing exposure to media, Centerwall redrew the theory of his study, claiming that it really should have been a two-factor model, factoring in not only television exposure but also economic conditions. Economic conditions affect the murder rate, he said: It goes up in bad times and when times are good it goes down. He said the television effect eventually saturates, after which its influence on the murder rate is steady-state. Thus, he claimed, rising postwar prosperity probably retarded somewhat the influence of television on the murder rate. Then, when that influence saturated, further prosperity kicked in to bring the rate down. He pointed to a particularly dramatic drop in English homicide rates between 1978 and 1981 as evidence of the success of Margaret Thatcher's economic policies, which he said had increased per capita income in England by 80 percent.

I passed along Centerwall's explanations to Franklin Zimring at Berkeley. In an emailed response Zimring barely restrained his scorn. Since Centerwall's theory is generated by U.S. and Canadian data patterns, he wrote, "it should be tested elsewhere." One way to do that is to look at U.S. and Canadian data after 1975. After 1975, it turns out, despite the continuing and increasing exposure to television, the homi-

cide rates leveled off and declines. Centerwall claims the television effect saturates. “Why and how this might be,” Zimring responds, “is anybody’s guess” — that is, Centerwall offers no evidence for his saturation theory; it looks like something he made up to explain why the data don’t fit his model. Zimring added that he’d never seen any evidence that economic conditions immediately impact homicide rates, but in any case, “the big drop in English homicide rates was between 1978’s high and 1981’s low. Mrs. Thatcher took office in 1979.” Causes are supposed to precede effects, but homicides were already declining before the British economy improved.

As for culture overriding television in Japan, Zimring wrote, “says who, and when?” The French murder rate trends upward between 1980 and 1985 and then trends downward, “but all of this leaves French homicide in 1990 at 35 percent lower than it was in 1960” when Centerwall’s theory would predict it to double. Italy, similarly, “goes up in the 1970s, drops back from 1981-1986, and then goes up again. How this pattern fits the Centerwall thesis is his secret.” Centerwall told me he based his claim that other European countries also experienced doubled murder rates (a claim Grossman also makes) on Interpol data. Wrong data, Zimring advised: “Most Continental countries report homicide and attempted murder together, which led our current drug czar to assert recently that Holland had a higher homicide rate than the United States. But even General McCafferty would not use Interpol data, which is unaudited and notorious.” In conclusion, Zimring wrote, “the off-hand and ad hoc quality of the responses that you report reinforce my disinclination to buy a used car from Dr. Centerwall.” Yet Centerwall’s theory has been a mainstay of American Medical Association and Congressional claims that television violence is destroying American youth.

Psychiatrists have been prominent players in the media violence controversy; though they have no special training in assessing broad social trends, people take them seriously because they’re medical doctors. An illustrious predecessor of Brandon Centerwall’s, the psychiatrist Frederic Wertham, indicted comic books in the 1940’s and 1950s as fervently as Centerwall has condemned electronic media. (Every popular art form — the novel, the circus, Punch ‘n Judy shows, comic strips, movies, rock ‘n roll, video games, now the Internet — starts out condemned as trash. One generation’s trash is the next generation’s art form.) Wertham had worked with juvenile delinquents in New York City in the immediate post-World War II years when juvenile delinquency was on the rise and Congress was looking for answers much as it looked for answers in the 1970s and 1980s when the homicide rate was going up. “If it were my task, Mr. Chairman, to teach children delinquency,” he testified before a Congressional committee in 1954, “to tell them how to rape and seduce girls, how to hurt people, how to break into stores, how to cheat, how to forge, how to do any known crime, if it were my task to teach that, I would have to enlist the crime comic book industry. Formerly to impair the morals of a minor was a punishable offense. It has now become a mass industry. I will say that every crime of delinquency is described in detail and that if you teach somebody the technique of something you, of course, seduce him into it. Nobody would believe that you teach a boy homosexuality without introducing him to it. The same thing with crime.”[7]

In those days being gay was believed to be a serious mental illness, and Wertham was convinced that Batman and Robin were a blatantly homosexual couple created to entice new recruits. (Robin, he wrote, “is buoyant with energy and devoted to nothing on earth or in interplanetary space as much as to Bruce Wayne. He often stands with his legs spread, the genital region discreetly evident.”)[8] The psychiatrist thought Superman was a fascist and worried that the muscular Krypton native gave children “a completely wrong idea of.basic physical laws” by leaping tall buildings at a single bound.[9] He called comic books “the marijuana of the nursery.” Like Grossman and Centerwall, Wertham demonstrated that literal-minded humorlessness is a requirement for media bashing, but Congress and the public took all this unsupported slander seriously. The comic book industry, which published 130 million copies a month, including at least 30 million devoted to crime and horror, capitulated after the 1954 Congressional hearings and thereafter published only G-rated stories. Fortunately for popular culture, the writers and artists laid off at EC Comics, the hardest hit when the industry crashed, went on to found *Mad* magazine.

Medical authorities, medical organizations and state and federal legislators have awarded statistical studies of media violence broader endorsement than Dave Grossman’s exaggerations or Brandon Centerwall’s purblind graphs. Statistics are said to correlate when they change together. When Centerwall showed the U.S.

murder rate and U.S. television-set ownership increasing during the same period of years, he was graphing a positive correlation between those two variables. If one variable had gone down when the other went up (as Centerwall claims murder rates and income do), that would be a negative correlation. That two variables correlate doesn't necessarily mean they're influencing each other; they may both be changing because of some third factor, or the change may be simply coincidental. Raincoats and umbrellas appear on the streets in increasing numbers on certain days of the year (a positive correlation), but raincoats aren't influencing umbrellas: Both appear because their owners believe it might rain. Correlations by definition can't reveal the cause of anything. They're simply interesting information which can sometimes offer clues about where to look for a cause.

The most celebrated correlations in the annals of media violence studies emerged from longterm investigations of aggression in school children conducted across twenty-two years (from 1960 to 1982) by psychologists Leonard D. Eron and L. Rowell Huesmann, both now professors at the University of Michigan (Huesmann joined the investigations in 1970). According to David Pearl, who administered media research at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), when the U.S. Surgeon General appointed a committee to review research on television violence at the beginning of the 1970s, Eron and Huesmann's investigation "was a key study leading to the Surgeon General's Committee conclusions."[10] Two decades later, when Congress passed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 which requires all new television sets to be equipped with a V-chip enabling parents to block out programs they don't want their children to see, the text of the Act implicitly invoked Eron and Huesmann's findings to justify its intrusion: "Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed.."[11]

Eron himself has candidly called the television violence component of his longterm aggression studies "the tail that wags the dog." He said he and his colleagues "got a lot of financial support through [investigating television violence]" — hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars, in fact — but that doing so had not been part of his original research agenda, because he didn't think it was important.[12] "More than 35 years ago," he reminisced in 1995, "when I started to do research on how children learn to be aggressive, I.was skeptical about the effects of television violence."[13] In 1960, Eron and his colleagues began studying 875 third graders — boys and girls eight or nine years old — in rural Columbia County in upstate New York. They wanted to identify what childhood experiences correlated with mental health problems later in life, and they decided to use aggression as an marker, since it was something they believed could be measured objectively. They asked the children who started fights, who got into trouble, who said mean things. They questioned parents and teachers. They measured popularity, anxiety, IQ and family values. One measure they recorded almost as an afterthought was how much violent television each third grader watched.

In 1963 Eron reported finding a correlation between aggressive behavior at school (as estimated by classmate peers) and violent television watching at home. A correlation only emerged for boys; there was no such connection for girls. To further confuse the issue, kids who watched the most television overall turned out to be the least aggressive.[14] Eron calls the finding for boys "unsuspected." He adds: "We didn't have too much confidence in the finding by itself" — nor should they have, given the zero finding for girls and the negative correlation overall. "You couldn't tell by these data alone," Eron explains, "whether aggressive boys liked violent television programs or whether the violent programs made boys aggressive — or whether aggression and watching violent television were both due to some other third factor."[15] Nor had the federal government yet become interested in the problem. Eron's requests for grant support were turned down twice in the 1960s by the NIMH and once more by another government agency.[16] But in 1970, when the Surgeon General's committee noticed the 1963 positive correlation for boys, it realized that the Columbia County third graders would now be graduating from high school, raising the possibility that a correlation between childhood exposure to violent television and adult aggression could now be measured. So the NIMH awarded Eron's team, now including Rowell Huesmann, a grant of $42,000, the first of several lucrative grants, and the psychologists were able to locate and reinterview 436 of the original 875 subjects. (The money the Surgeon General granted for such speculative media studies — $1.5 million in all — was gouged from the NIMH budget by eliminating or postponing the construction of community mental health centers, at a time when mental institutions were being closed all across America and tens of thousands mental patients were being turned out onto the streets.[17])

In their followup, Eron and Huesmann found a correlation of .31 between boys' preference for violent television at age 8 (based on their mothers' estimates) and their peer-rated aggressiveness at age 18. In other words, the psychologists found that a preference for viewing mock violence on television in the third grade might account for 10 percent (the square of the correlation) of the childhood influences that led the boys to become aggressive adults.

Assessing this famous correlation, Jib Fowles points out that Eron and Huesmann had looked at two other measures of adult aggression besides peer reports: self-reports and the results of psychological tests which they administered. These two other measures *did not* correlate significantly with age 8 television preference. Nor did any of the three measures correlate for girls. Another research team, Fowles says, might conclude from such a poor showing — only one of six possible correlations turning out to be significant, and that one only weakly — that their data failed to support their theory. Eron and Huesmann chose instead to highlight the one correlation that might. "It is difficult to believe," Fowles concludes, "that a study with such a weak single finding has been taken so seriously by so many thoughtful people."[18]

A bold, savvy psychologist at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, David Sohn, points to even more damning problems with Eron and Huesmann's famous correlation. If watching television is influencing an eight-year-old boy to be aggressive, Sohn argues, you would expect such influence to be more intense at the time than ten years later. But the correlation Eron and Huesmann found between age 8 TV exposure and aggressive behavior at the same age was only .21 — 4 percent. Ten years later, despite years of intervening experiences, the correlation of *age 8* exposure with age 18 aggression had grown to .31. How could that be? Influences weaken as time passes and other experiences intervene — they don't strengthen. Even more weirdly, Sohn points out, the correlation *disappears* in between: a partial sample of 64 boys in the study, reinterviewed in the mid-1960s, revealed *no* correlation between age 8 exposure and aggressiveness at age *13.*[19] Which would mean that an eight-year-old's TV exposure influences his aggressiveness immediately, has no measurable influence five years later, then mysteriously reemerges five years after that to influence an 18-year-old's behavior even more than it did when he was eight — an obvious absurdity.

So I looked up Rowell Huesmann at the University of Michigan and asked him about the mysterious loss of correlation at age 13. Rather than defend the failure of the study to find a measurable correlation, the professor of psychology blamed the anomaly on mistakes by his colleagues. "The little 8th-grade data they had collected was incomplete and clearly biased," Huesmann asserted in his response. "Once I joined the project in 1970 as Analysis Director, I argued successfully against analyzing or reporting at all on the 8th grade data."[20] With a larger, "unbiased" sample, he added, the .31 correlation that turned up at age 18 might also have shown up in thirteen-year-olds. It's equally possible, of course, that it might not. The fact remains that the partial sample correlation at age 13 — published in 1972, *with Huesmann's name on the paper* — was effectively zero.

Despite these serious problems, Eron and Huesmann's investigation had hatched a result the NIMH could use to get media-muzzling Senators off its back, and the psychologists were encouraged to continue their followup studies with taxpayer support. "In 1980-82," Huesmann emailed me, "we .tracked down and reinterviewed as many of [the] boys [in the Columbia County study] as we could. We interviewed 198 males from the original 1960 sample of 436." By then the boys were 30 years old. A few of them had been convicted of violent crimes. Huesmann worked his statistical magic and came up with some impressive correlations.

In 1986, officially representing the American Psychological Association, he reported his team's new findings proudly to the Senate Judiciary Committee. "Because the National Institute of Mental Health was generous enough to give us funding," Huesmann told the senators, "we were able to go back 10 years later and 22 years later and track down these subjects, most recently in 1982 when these subjects were now 30 years old. We were able to look at the extent to which their early television viewing behavior related to their adult aggression and criminality..What we found was a strong relation between early television violence viewing and adult criminality. Television viewing in and of itself related to adult criminality, regardless of what the children were watching. But more specifically for boys, *there was a strong relation between early violence viewing and later adult criminality."*[21] To make that twice-mentioned "strong relation" vivid, Huesmann presented the senators with a bar graph — "simply intended to be," he explained to me in his email, "a visual illustration of the correlation between age 8 TV violence viewing and adult criminality." The bar graph measured "Seriousness of Criminal Convictions by Age 30" on a scale of 1-10

against “Boys’ Preference for Violent Television at Age 8.” It showed three stark black bars stepping up from low preference (4.23 on the seriousness scale) to medium preference (4.71 on the seriousness scale). The high preference group at 9.71 almost doubled in seriousness of criminal convictions, bumping the 10 limit.[22] The clear implication was that an eight-year-old who watches mock violence on television is likely to grow up to be a rapist or a murderer.

Needless to say, Huesmann’s bar graph was high drama and a call to arms. To the senators and the assembled press, it looked like clear evidence that how much violent television a boy watches in childhood will correspond closely to how heinous a violent criminal he will turn out to be two decades later. Since 1986, Huesmann has made that claim repeatedly. In 1996, defending his work in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter* under a headline calling media violence “a demonstrated public health threat to children,” he claimed that his 1982 study found that “boys who spent the most time viewing violent television shows at age eight were most likely to have criminal convictions at age 30.”[23]

But Huesmann has been curiously selective about where he reports his TV violence/criminal conviction finding. It went unmentioned in the final report on the 22-year aggression study that he and Eron published in the prestigious journal *Developmental Psychology* in 1984. Not one of the team’s media violence findings appears there, not even the celebrated .31 correlation. Instead, the report affirms what psychologists have long known about aggressive behavior: that early aggressiveness predicts later violence and that violence runs in families. (Which doesn’t make it hereditary. There’s strong evidence that violence is learned behavior, and violence begets violence.) All the final report says about television, lamely, is that “examples of aggressive behavior are abundantly available in the media as well as at home, at school, and in the neighborhood.”[24] Watching violent television goes unmentioned. Evidently Eron’s initial skepticism about the effects of television violence was justified.

Why should Huesmann’s “strong relation” between violent television viewing and adult criminality have dropped out of his and Eron’s final summary of twenty-two years of scientific investigation? The likeliest reason is that the independent scientists who reviewed the report when it was submitted to *Developmental Psychology* (in the evaluation process known as peer review) did not think the data justified the two psychologists’s conclusions.

And what was that data? Huesmann has never published the crucial numbers that would make it possible to judge the significance of his age 8 violent television/age 30 violent criminal convictions correlation. The dramatic bar graph he showed to the Senate Judiciary Committee, with its low, medium and high TV violence bars plotted against seriousness of criminal convictions, doesn’t give the number of boys for whom the two measures correlate. I found a clue to this puzzling omission in a paper Huesmann and a colleague published in a book Huesmann edited in 1994. The paper, portentously titled “Long-Term Effects of Repeated Exposure to Media Violence in Childhood,” works all sorts of statistical sleight-of-hand to try to prove that watching TV turns boys into violent criminals. But buried in the text is a remarkable admission: “Unfortunately, the sample on which this conclusion was based was very small because of technical difficulties..While the results are significant, they mostly reflect the behavior of a few high violence viewers and must be treated very cautiously.”[25] Scientists are supposed to publish their data so that their claims to discovery can be checked, but even while grudgingly admitting that his data had problems, Huesmann chose in this 1994 book not to reveal the numbers.

I wondered what he was hiding. When I emailed him I bluntly asked him for the numbers. The answer was incredible. “The correlation between [age 8 TV violence viewing and adult violent crime],” Huesmann wrote me, “was entirely due to 3 boys who committed violent crimes and had scored high on age 8 TV violence viewing.” Three boys! Huesmann’s team had identified New York State records for 145 boys from the original age 8 study. Of these, 66 had committed crimes, but only 24 had committed violent crimes. The “technical difficulties” which Huesmann mentioned in his 1994 book, he now explained, were that “just 3 of the 24 boys arrested for violent crimes had contributed TV violence data [at age 8].” It happened that “all three had scored high on age 8 TV violence viewing.” With serious violent crimes in adulthood and high TV violence scores in the third grade, the numbers on these three boys — *the only boys with criminal convictions for whom age 8 TV data existed* — poison the entire 145-boy sample. As Huesmann himself acknowledged, “if just these three boys had behaved differently, all the significant results could have vanished.” David Sohn puts it differently. “For 142 of the individuals,” he wrote me after reviewing my correspondence with Huesmann, “there is no relationship between TV violence at age 8 and arrests for violent

crime. Huesmann knew from the very beginning that he did not have enough cases with data for the two key variables to permit a meaningful analysis. He does the analysis anyway and conceals the crucial facts about having only three cases. Of course, what he should have done is not to use such inadequate data."

But Huesmann went even farther. He made up a bogus bar graph that deliberately misrepresented his findings and used it to influence the Senate Judiciary Committee to pass a law intended to limit creative expression on television. With age 8 violent TV viewing data on only three boys with criminal convictions, he had no factual basis for presenting "Low" and "Medium" bars. All three boys scored "High" on TV violence viewing. The graph is a fraud.

II

The sociologist Howard Becker categorizes media violence zealots like Dave Grossman, Brandon Centerwall, former Vice President Dan Quayle and former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett as "moral entrepreneurs."[26] Part of their hostility, Jib Fowles argues, is simple snobbery, although surveys reveal that the affluent and the highly-educated watch about as many hours of television every week as everybody else. A deeper reason for their hostility is fear of losing social control. Thinking about the role of modern mass communications in social control, Fowles realized that entertainment media have come to satisfy many of the needs that religion used to fulfill: giving people a common frame of reference, a common community with which to identify and a safe place within which to experience emotional release. "The mass media comprise a new social institution," he told me. "And not only is it new, but it seems to be eating into the traditional social institutions of religion, community, family and so on. All these institutions are shrinking with the exception of education and mass media. We're choosing to integrate ourselves in very different ways and largely through the mass media." It shouldn't be surprising, then, that the moral entrepreneurs — the guardians of the traditional institutions — have led the attack. Blaming the media for criminal violence is one campaign in an ongoing turf war.

Fowles was stuck by the contrast between the negativity of the moral entrepreneurs and the immense popularity of entertainment media. That popularity in itself argued against negative effects and in favor of positive effects. The media scholar wondered if any social science studies had turned up positive responses to watching television, including violent television. After a thorough search of the literature he found several which did. They were hard to find; though they were first-rate studies, they were seldom referenced because they disputed the reigning paradigm that television is bad for you.

In one thorough and careful field study, a highly respect psychologist named Seymour Feshbach had controlled the television viewing of some 400 boys in three private boarding schools and four boys' homes for six weeks, limiting half the boys to programs high in violent content and the other half to nonaggressive programs. Trained observers judged aggression levels in the boys before and after the controlled viewing period. "No behavioral differences were reported for the adolescents in the private schools," Fowles summarizes Feshbach's findings, "but among the poorer, semidelinquent youths, those who had been watching the more violent shows were calmer than their peers on the blander viewing diet." Feshbach concluded that "exposure to aggressive content on television seems to reduce or control the expression of aggression in aggressive boys from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds."[27] When Fowles interviewed Feshbach about this impressive finding, Feshbach interpreted it to mean that fantasy served the cause of self-control. "Television fantasies," he told Fowles, "supplement a person's own imagination, and help him discharge pent-up aggression in the same way that dreams and other products of the imagination can do."[28]

Fowles also located a definitive refutation of Eron and Huesmann's supposed "criminal violence" finding. He calls the little-noticed study by sociologist Steven F. Messner of the State University of New York at Albany "broad-based and most remarkable."[29] Messner set out to determine if "population aggregates with high levels of exposure to violent television content also exhibit high rates of criminal violence."[30] He took his list of "violent" television shows from content analyses developed by the National Coalition on Television Violence (NCTV), an antiviolence advocacy group which counts "violent acts per hour."

Messner next collected Nielsen ratings for the shows on the NCTV list, which estimated their audience size — their popularity — in a number of U.S. metropolitan areas. He then looked up F.B. I. crime rates for those areas for criminal homicide, forcible rape, robbery and aggravated assault. His final step was to match up crime rates in the metropolitan areas against the popularity of "violent" television shows in the same areas.

"The results are quite surprising," Messner wrote in his understated conclusion. "For each measure of violent crime, the estimate for the level of exposure to television violence is negative.. In other words, [metropolitan areas] in which large audiences are attracted to violent television programming tend to exhibit *low* rates of violent crime."[31]

Messner offered a simple explanation for his finding: When people are home watching television, they're not out committing violent crimes. And since they're home watching television, burglars can't rob their houses. He even checked his burglary prevention theory. Rates in areas where violent television was popular turned out to be lower not only for burglary but also for auto theft and larceny (simple theft) as well.

I contacted Messner to ask him how his study had been received by the media effects community. He described submitting it to a major sociology journal, where it collected mixed peer reviews and was ultimately rejected. One hostile reviewer criticized it as "a mechanical exercise in which the author routinely applies a packaged program to a set of data," adding scornfully, "After all, the ultimate goal is not to generate a pretty story and an apparently significant set of findings, but actually to find out something real about society."[32] Do I hear Rowell Huesmann's sarcasm in this slashing anonymous assault? The study was ultimately published in the journal *Social Problems*. "As near as I can tell," Messner emailed me, "it never did generate much reaction, either positive or negative."[33] He was happy to hear that Jib Fowles had singled it out for praise.

"This whole episode of studying television violence," Fowles concluded when we talked, "is going to be seen by history as a travesty. It's going to be used in classes as an example of how social science can just go totally awry."

Fowles found support for the idea that entertainment media serves for emotional release in the work of a predecessor media scholar, Gerhardt Wiebe, who was dean of Boston University's School of Public Communication.[34] Wiebe proposed that the function of the entertainment media is to ease the stresses of socialization, defined as "the process by which an individual becomes a member of a given social group." Being socialized means being molded and changed — from a rebellious adolescent to a productive, conforming adult, from a self-directed private individual before and after work to a group-directed employee during working hours — and such transformation is stressful. Television and other entertainment media work to relieve that stress. "All kinds of Americans," Fowles writes in his 1992 book *Why Viewers Watch*, "in all states of mind, turn to the medium for the balm it provides. The most troubled are perhaps the most aided. For the segment of the population that has been crushed by the real world, and has had to be removed from it, television is clearly a boon. Anyone who has visited an institution where humans are confined knows that television exerts a calming, beneficent influence..The administrators of hospitals, prisons and asylums realize that their charges can be highly volatile or depressed, and that television is an efficient, nonchemical means for easing their torments."[35]

Wiebe defined three kinds of messages that media send. *Directive* messages come from authority figures and "command, exhort, instruct, persuade." Directive messages seldom get through, Wiebe observes; since the people at home control the remote, they tend to switch channels or downgrade directives into *maintenance* messages — the routine communications which support the knowledge and beliefs people already have. Thus programs on specialized subjects — Greece, say, or transvestite culture, or World War II — tend to draw audiences who already know about those subjects rather than the uninformed.

The primary function of the entertainment media, Wiebe proposes, is to supply *restorative* messages, which allow people to restore themselves "from the strain of adapting, the weariness of conforming." Restorative messages are "the adult counterpart of youthful protest and retaliation against authority figures" which appear "spontaneously, and apparently inevitably, as an antidote for the strictures of organized living." Restorative messages feature "crime, violence, disrespect for authority, sudden and unearned wealth, sexual indiscretion, freedom from social restraints." Their themes, Wiebe observes brilliantly, "seem to

make up a composite reciprocal [that is, a negative counterset, an antidote] of the values stressed in adult socialization." Rock music, rap, movies like *Natural Born Killers* or *Pulp Fiction,* lurid music videos, video games and any number of "violent" television programs are evidence in support of Wiebe's insight.

Because the essence of restorative messages, as Wiebe argues, is "token retaliation against the establishment," censoring the protest and the violence and substituting what social scientists call "prosocial" programming will simply cause viewers to turn elsewhere for the restorative messages they crave. Wiebe's characterization of restorative programming as "token retaliation" makes it clear why establishment institutions and the moral entrepreneurs who speak for them are so quick to condemn entertainment media, particularly when rising juvenile delinquency rates, school shootings, teenage pregnancies and other problems panic them with fears that socialization might be breaking down: Uncomfortable already with the feeling that new social institutions are emerging to replace them, they're seized with the fear that the peasants might actually take the programs seriously and storm the barricades of their authority and privilege. One of their defensive maneuvers has been to employ social scientists to "prove" that entertainment media are dangerous. Sadly, to the perversion of their science, the social scientists have complied, although the First Amendment has limited the effectiveness of their assaults.

Media performances serve vicariously to intensify and then resolve tension, carrying away in the process all sorts of psychic detritus. They make it possible to put on a hero's armor, slay dragons and then hang up your armor and be yourself. Fowles calls the procedure "mental cleansing and redemption."[36] At their most basic, entertainment media take the psychic garbage out.

The whole thrust of socialization across the past thousand years in Western culture has been toward reducing private violence in order to foster more effective social interaction in an increasingly complex and interdependent society. This movement, which historian Norbert Elias calls "the civilizing process," has advanced by internalizing the social prohibition against violence, and with that prohibition has come an advancing threshold of revulsion against violence. People who are seriously violent take pleasure in their violence. As people moved away from malevolence toward civility, the pleasure of doing violence was gradually displaced by the pleasure of seeing violence done — such as watching public executions and attending cockfights, bullfights and bare-knuckle boxing matches.

The pleasure of seeing violence done has in turn gradually been displaced by today's pleasure in seeing *mock* violence done in sports and in entertainment. Thus the increasing revulsion against bullfighting, hunting and boxing and the interdiction of public executions. More recently even mock violence has come under suspicion, especially as fare for children (who used to be taken to see public executions to show them why they shouldn't misbehave). So media violence has come to be tolerated more than endorsed. When real violence breaks out — the rise of juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, the riots and assassinations of the 1960s, the rash of white-on-white school shootings in the later 1990s — revulsion at media violence intensifies, and the mandarins of psychology and sociology trot out their statistical charts.

But there is no good evidence that taking pleasure from seeing mock violence leads to violent behavior, and there is some evidence, as Jib Fowles found, that it leads away. Bottom line: To become violent, people have to have experience with real violence. Period. No amount of imitation violence can provide that experience. Period. At the same time, mock violence can and does satisfy the considerable need to experience strong emotion that people, including children, build up from hour to hour and day to day while functioning in the complex and frustrating interdependencies of modern civilization. So can comedy; so can serious drama; but young males especially (and even not-so-young males) evidently take special satisfaction in watching mock violence, whether dramatic or athletic. "Whatever the relation of this need may be to other, more elementary needs such as hunger, thirst, and sex," concludes Norbert Elias, ".one may well find that the neglect of paying attention to this need is one of the main gaps in present approaches to problems of mental health."[37]

A New Jersey teenager, Joe Stavitsky, responded to an attack on video games in *Harper's* magazine after Columbine with an eloquent letter in their defense. "As a 'geek,'" Stavitsky wrote, "I can tell you that none of us play video games to learn how (or why) to shoot people. For us, video games do not cause violence; they prevent it. We see games as a perfectly safe release from a physically violent reaction to the daily abuse leveled at us." Stavitsky, whose family emigrated from Leningrad when he was four to escape a communist dictatorship, concluded his letter with some pointed advice to the moral entrepreneurs. "The so-

called experts should put away their pens," he advised, "and spend more time with their children or grandchildren, or better yet, adopt a child who has no home or family. Because there's only one sure way to prevent youth violence, and that is by taking care of youth." We do not take care of youth when we deny them entertainment which allows them to safely challenge the powerlessness they feel at not yet controlling their own lives and then to find symbolic resolution. Entertainment media are therapeutic, not toxic. That's what the evidence shows. Cyber bullets don't kill.

Notes

1.. All quotes from Dave Grossman's speech are tran scriptions from his videotape "Teaching Kids To Kill."

2.. Rhodes (1999), p. 216.

3.. Gadow and Sprafkin (1989), p. 401, p. 402.

4.. Centerwall (!989), p. 15.

5.. Centerwall (1992), p. 3061.

6.. Zimring and Hawkins (1997), p. 243.

7.. Twitchell (1989), p. 143.

8.. Twitchell (1989), p. 152.

9.. Twitchell (1989), p. 153, p. 154.

10.. HR 83, p. 46.

11.. Quoted in Fowles (1999), p. 126.

12.. Quoted in Fowles (1999), p. 35.

13.. Eron (1995), p. 84.

14.. Fowles (1999), p. 35.

15.. Eron (1995), p. 85.

16.. Cater and Strickland (1975), p. 47.

17.. Cater and Strickland (1975), p. 21.

18.. Fowles (1999), pp. 36-37.

19.. Cf. Lefkowitz et al. (1972), p. 55, Table 8, item 11.

20.. Huesmann 13 March 2000 email, p. 11.

21 My emphasis

22.. Cf. S. 2323, p. 95.

23.. Huesmann and Moise (1996), p. 2.

24.. Huesmann et al. (1984), p. 1133.

25.. Huesmann and Miller (1994), p. 169.

26.. Gauntlett (1995), p. 107, citing Howard Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, New York: The Free Press, 1963.

27.. Fowles (1997), p. 30. (Feshbach quoted in Fowles, op. cit.)

28.. Quoted in Fowles (1992), p. 142.

29.. Fowles (1997), p. 48.

30.. Messner (1986), p. 218.

31.. Messner (1986), pp. 223-224.

32.. Steve Messner 2/24/00 email, pp. 2-3.

33.. Messner, op. cit., p. 3.

34.. Wiebe (1969).

35.. Fowles (1992), p. 54.

36.. Fowles (1992), p. 87.

37.. Elias (1986), p. 89