Does television cause aggressive behaviour?

## OVERVIEW OF RISK FACTORS RELATED TO TV VIOLENCE AND CHILDREN

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The article summarises international research findings on children, television and aggression with regard to factors which can moderate the effects of media violence on youth.

The debate on the potential effects of media violence is as old as the media. There is no type of media which has not, at some point in history, been suspected of promoting aggression in its users because of its representations of violence (cf. Kunczik, 2011, pp. 42ff.). Public opinion is especially overhasty in scapegoating audio visual media such as television, in which a particularly realistic depiction of violence is possible. Yet the findings produced by decades of research on television violence suggest that the cause-effect relationships are considerably more complex than assumed.[1]

In view of the importance society ascribes to this issue, it comes as no surprise that most of the studies carried out have been concerned with the short-term or long-term effects of the reception of violent media content on youth (cf. Ill. 1). The majority of the empirical studies come from the US, Great Britain, Germany, Scandinavia and the Netherlands (cf. Gentile et al., 2007). Along with experimental research designs, we find mainly longitudinal and cross-sectional studies, content analyses and meta-analyses (Wilson, 2008, p. 107).

As Kunczik (2011) sees it, the problem of imprecise definitions of violence
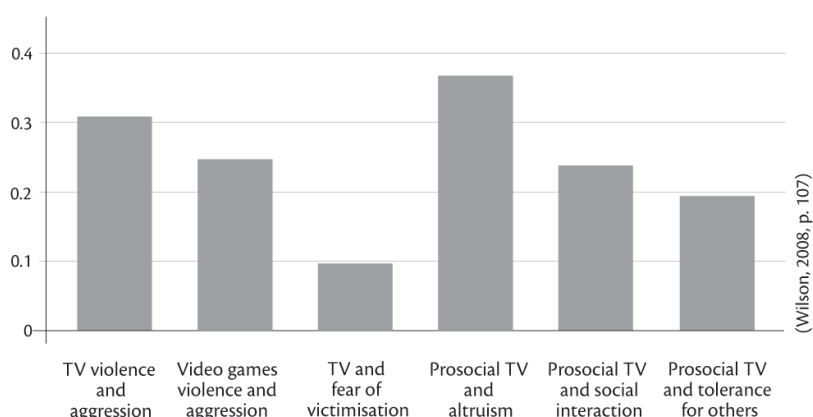
Ill. 1: Effect sizes *(r)* of exposure to various types of media content and various social outcomes

in the research is "unfortunately not a historical phenomenon, but (…) still very much a current issue" (ibid., p. 39). Aggression (from the Latin word "aggredi"= approach, advance, attack) is defined as a deliberate behaviour intended to harm another person. Most of the existing research on media violence focuses on the destructive aspect of aggression (cf. blue box), although some scholars do also see aggression as being a constructive act of self-assertion and active outward orientation (e.g. Götz, 2014). From this perspective, aggression is defined in value-neutral terms as a behaviour which is essentially the opposite of passivity and reserve (cf. Bach & Goldberg, 1983).

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CATEGORISATION OF EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Most of the research is based on a multi-causal understanding of the genesis of aggression: "Any statement that a specific act of violence is 'caused' by a single event is an oversimplification. Numerous factors influence the

development of aggressive tendencies in children and young adults in the long run and the commission of violent acts in the short run." (Bushman & Huesmann, 2001, p. 223) Empirical studies generally find only weak correlations between the consumption of media violence and negative effects on a cognitive, emotional and behavioural level. Existing meta-analyses have established correlation coefficients of between r=0.1 and r=0.31, which means that no more than 9% of recipients' aggression can be explained by media violence (cf. Comstock & Scharrer, 2003, p. 208). With this in mind, the main thing research can do is outline the combinations of conditions in which aggressive actions influenced by television violence are likely to occur. Findings on the question of causality between the consumption of media violence and aggression remain heterogeneous. While some longitudinal studies demonstrate that aggressiveness stimulates interest in media violence (selection hypothesis), the amount of exposure to televised violence is a predictor of higher levels of aggression (effect hypothesis) for girls and boys after 2 years, 10 years, 15 years, or 17 years, independent of the initial level of aggression in earlier years (cf. overview of international studies in Hopf et al., 2008, p. 79). Some researchers suggest that there is a reciprocal relationship in which children with aggressive tendencies seek out more violent media content and are even more affected by it than other young people, creating a "downward spiral" (cf. Huesmann et al. 2003; Slater et al., 2003).

Most scholars therefore believe we should regard the reception of violent television content as one "risk factor" among many, rather than talking about causal relationships (Escobar-Chaves & Anderson, 2008, p. 169, cf. Ill. 2). The existing empirical findings can, on the one hand, provide insights into which forms of television violence should be regarded as especially high-risk for children. On the other hand, research can

give information about which young recipients are particularly at risk when it comes to cause-effect relationships associated with aggression.

Bushman, Brad J. & Huesmann, L. Rowell (2001). Effects of televised violence on aggression. In Dorothy Singer & Jerome Singer (Eds), Handbook of children and the media (pp. 223-254). Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Comstock, George & Scharrer, Erica (2003). Meta-analyzing the controversy over television violence and aggression. In Douglas A. Gentile (Ed.), Media violence and children (pp. 205-226). Westport: Praeger.

Hopf, Werner H., Huber, Günter L. & Weiß, Rudolf H. (2008). Media violence and youth violence. A 2-year longitudinal study. Journal of Media Psychology, 20(3), 79-96.

Huesmann, L. Rowell, Moise-Titus, Jessica, Podolski, Cheryl-Lynn & Eron, Leonard D. (2003). Longitudinal relations between children's exposure to TV violence and their aggressive and violent behavior in young adulthood: 1977-1992. Developmental Psychology, 39(2), 201-221.

Slater; Michael D., Henry, Kimberly L., Swaim, Randall C. & Anderson, Lori L. (2003). Violent Media Content and Aggressiveness in Adolescents. A Downward Spiral Model. Communication Research, 30(6), 713-736

Escobar-Chaves, Soledad Liliana & Anderson, Craig A. (2008). Media and Risky Behaviors. The Future of Children, 18(1), 147-180.

RISK FACTORS: ASPECTS OF TELEVISION CONTENT

According to Wilson (2008, p. 240), "the landscape of television is full of violence and it has not changed much since the early 1970s." Content analysis research from the US has documented that children's programmes are significantly more likely to contain violence (69%) than non-children's programmes (57%) (ibid., p. 239). Although such studies are a helpful instrument for identifying the potential dangers of television violence, the mere number of acts of violence counted says nothing about how they are perceived by children. The dominant view in the research is that the decisive factor is not the quantity of television violence shown, but the context

in which it is portrayed (cf. Kunczik & Zipfel, 2010, p. 473).

Within the context of representations of violence, the following aspects are regarded as particularly high-risk (cf. Anderson et al., 2003, pp. 98 ff.; Kunczik & Zipfel, 2010, pp. 474 ff.):

- **Justification for violence:**
  According to observational learning theory, when violence is portrayed as justified, children are likely to come to believe that their own aggressive responses are appropriate. Experimental studies suggest that the representation of provoked or justified violence can have an impact on children's positive evaluations of aggressive acts.

- **Portrayal of the consequences of aggression:**
  It is especially problematic when violence is depicted as a means of solving problems, when violent behaviour appears to be rewarded or at least not punished, and when the negative consequences for the victim are not shown.

- **Identification with and attraction to aggressive TV characters:**
  There is evidence suggesting that children are particularly likely to identify with and be influenced by an aggressive character portrayed as similar to themselves. The ap-
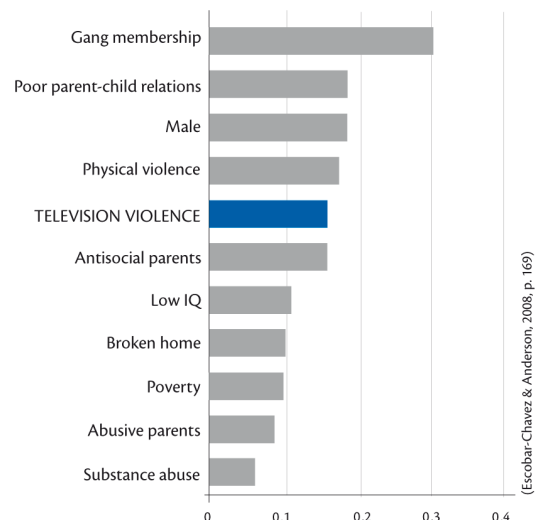
Ill. 2: Risk factors for youth violence based on longitudinal evidence (effect size, r)

(Escobar-Chavez & Anderson, 2008, p. 169)

peal of violent protagonists is also an important element: children tend to identify with heroes who are notable for their fascinating appearance, their exceptional strength and/or their special abilities.

• **Degree of realism:**
Research found that children who thought that violent TV content they watched was "just like it really is" had relatively high average scores on a measure of aggression. The findings of existing studies also suggest that knowledge offers no protection against effects: the ability of older children to distinguish between fact and fiction can reduce fearful reactions to especially realistic television violence, but cannot necessarily reduce its aggression-promoting effects.

RISK FACTORS: VIEWER CHARACTERISTICS AND SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The following characteristics of the viewer and his or her social environment are considered as relevant risk factors (cf. Common Sense Media, 2013, p. 16 ff.; Anderson et al., 2003, pp. 96 ff.; Kunczik & Zipfel, 2010, pp. 253 ff.):

• **Age:**
The predominant view is that the effects of media violence are particularly strong among younger children under the age of 5. There is no evidence, however, of a general or linear correlation between age and the effect on aggression. Age-related differences are associated with the stage of cognitive development, the ability to adopt other points of view, the capacity to make moral judgements, and the differing perception of media violence, depending on which developmental themes are currently relevant for children.

• **Gender:**
With regard to gender, earlier studies assumed that the effects of

media violence in terms of aggressive behaviour were stronger among boys. More recent research findings show less difference between the sexes, though girls are significantly more likely than boys to show fear instead of aggressive reactions to violent television content.

• **Aggressiveness:**
Negative effects of media violence are particularly likely to appear among young people who already display a high level of aggressiveness. Low self-esteem or sensation-seeking tendencies can also interact with other factors to foster aggressive modes of behaviour.

• **Social environment:**
The international research clearly indicates that children's social environment (family, school, peers) has an important moderating effect in the genesis of violent behaviour. The aspect regarded as crucial here is the role models found within the social environment, in terms of both media use and violent behaviour. Children who are exposed to a negligent style of parenting, and who frequently experience violence in their immediate surroundings, tend to regard the violence they see on television as "normal," and to find violent media models especially attractive. Some scholars believe that the consumption of media violence and young people's own experiences of violence reinforce each other (the "double dose" effect).

Complex network of causes for aggressive behaviour

So does television make children aggressive? There is a broad consensus in the research that violent media content can have negative effects when risk factors such as those outlined above coincide, and when these cannot be balanced out by other protective factors (such as a non-violent and caring parenting style). Overall, however, the

effect should be seen as moderate, since media violence is only one factor in a complex network of causes explaining aggressive behaviour. According to Sonia Livingstone, "the focus on simple and direct causal effects of the media is no longer appropriate. Instead, research should seek to identify the range of factors that directly, and indirectly through interactions with each other, combine to explain particular social phenomena. (…) In some cases, this may reduce the focus on the media – for example, by bringing into view the many other factors that account for present levels of violence in society." (Livingstone, 2007, pp. 8 ff.) The latest research on media violence takes this assessment into account, using problem group analyses to empirically examine the multi-dimensional relationships between media consumption and aggression, especially among at-risk sub-populations (cf. Common Sense Media, 2013, p. 16). ■

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NOTE

HOW AGGRESSION IS DEFINED AND MEASURED IN RESEARCH

Definitions of violence and aggression

Existing research defines "aggression," "violence," and "antisocial behaviour" in various ways or not at all. This leads to a high variance in the operationalisation of violence, making it more difficult to compare these studies. The problem begins with the fact that media studies on violence do not work with a consistent understanding of what it means to represent and perform violence. This can be seen, for instance, in Potter's list of the 13 different definitions of violence used in content analyses (1999, pp. 68-69). Mostly violence is broadly defined and comprises not only physical, but also verbal aggression (e.g. mocking or swearing), as well as criminal offences, such as vandalism, theft, or fraud. Some even include "accidental" violence or acts of nature "because they are always purposeful in fiction, claim victims, and demonstrate power." (ibid., p. 68) Studies occasionally also incorporate indirect violence in their definitions. Kunczik and Zipfel (2010, p. 21) criticise that research rarely considers structural violence, that is, violence enabled by the social system; in this case, violence is not carried out by a concrete perpetrator and is often not consciously recognised by its victims.

Measures of aggression

The definition of aggression is also affected by the means of its measurement. According to Grimes et al. (2008), "measurement problems link closely with the inability to pin down definitions of both aggression and violence. Until definitions can be clearly delineated, measurement will continue to have problems with consistency." (ibid., p. 131)

Aside from instruments such as tests, laboratory measures of aggression have included asking children, for instance, whether or not they wanted to pop a balloon, or observing them at play, "although it has proven difficult to distinguish between aggressive play (e.g., playing cowboys and Indians) and true aggression (e.g., pushing a child down to steal lunch money)." (Ferguson, 2010, p. 41) Surveys used in correlation and experimental designs measure aggression based on self-reported aggression or parent report measures. Peer ratings among children have also been applied, "but it is not entirely clear whether children have enough insight to actually rate each others' aggressive behaviors rather than turn any negative sounding set of questions into a popularity contest." (ibid., p. 41) These ratings must also be tested for validity. The peer-rating questions used in some TV violence studies (cf. Lefkowitz et al., 1977) seem to be related to naughtiness, but only a few actually involve violent behaviour (cf. Ill. 3).

1. Who does not obey the teacher?
2. Who often says, "Give me that"?
3. Who gives dirty looks or sticks out their tongue at other children?
4. Who makes up stories and lies to get other children into trouble?
5. Who does things that bother others?
6. Who starts a fight over nothing?
7. Who pushes or shoves other children?
8. Who is always getting into trouble?
9. Who says mean things?
10. Who takes other children's things without asking?

Ill. 3: Peer-rating questions used in TV violence studies

Ferguson, 2010, p. 41

The aggressive outcomes measured in experiments are rarely physical violence, but rather other related outcomes, such as attitudes accepting violence or feelings of hostility (cf. Cantor, 2000, p. 31). Existing meta-analyses associate TV violence with a wide range of antisocial behaviour, ranging from the trivial (children's imitative violence directed against toys) to the serious (criminal violence), with many consequential outcomes in between (acceptance of violence as a solution to problems or increased feelings of hostility) (ibid., p. 31).

As Grimes et al. critically remark, "So what are we actually talking about? It appears that we are talking about nearly anything that can be considered 'not nice,' from 'hostile thoughts' to 'flipping off' one's fellow drivers to more active play in a contact sport." (2008, p. 77)

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