



International School

Media

6.6 The impact of the media on behaviour



Arguments and evidence about the extent to which violent media leads to violent behaviour

- The idea that exposure to violent media contributes to or causes violent behaviour, especially among vulnerable groups is a pervasive one across many cultures. However, evidence for this is not as definite as media suggest.
- One of the most common explanations of how the media may lead to violent behaviour is imitation.
- **Bandura et al.'s (1961):** 'Bobo doll' experiment
- This leads to the idea that immature and vulnerable audiences simply imitate the behaviour they see in the media. This explanation repeats throughout various media from time to time.





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- Two criminal cases that involved allegations of imitation of media violence were:
 - In the USA two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, shot dead 12 of their fellow students at Columbine school in 1999. Their actions were subsequently explained in some parts of the media as a consequence of playing 'violent video games', *Doom*
 - In the UK, the murder of two-year old James Bulger in 1993 by two 10-year-old boys was attributed by some media reporting to a violent horror film called *Child's Play 3* rented by the father of one of the boys and which it was assumed they had watched. There was no evidence they had actually seen it.





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- Research into the influence of the media on violent behaviour is full of methodological problems.
- **Belson's (1978)** study was based upon in-depth interviews with 1565 teenage boys in London. Boys with high television exposure were compared to those with low exposure. Conclusion > boys who had seen a lot of TV had committed 49% more acts of violence.
- His study has been criticised for failing to distinguish adequately between high exposure to TV in general and high exposure to violent TV programmes in particular.
- **Howitt (1992):** Belson's results show that there are three types of viewer: those with light, moderate and high exposure. Those with moderate were more likely to commit violent acts.





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- **Cultural effects** model: if the media show violence as normal or acceptable as a way of settling disputes, audiences may over time absorb this views of the world. E.g. heavy consumers of violent films and TV, or those who spend a lot of time playing violent, immersive, video games, may develop a 'violent mindset'.
- **Gerbner (1994)**: powerful and pervasive media in global societies creates mythical realities for audiences, and heavy media consumers find it difficult to distinguish media myth from reality.. Violence is presented as a glamorous solution to individual and social problems + desensitisation.





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- Other approaches reject the idea that there is a relatively simple one-way relationship between the media and violence.
- **Huesmann and Miller (1994):** there is a more complex, two-way relationship between the media and audience. People accepted violence during early socialisation are more likely to exhibit violent behaviour when they are placed under great stress or fear.
- **Chandler (1995):** media 'induces general mindset' around particular areas of social life, such as crime, taking on a hegemonic role where some beliefs are encouraged and others discouraged. Attitudes and behaviours do not change overnight, however.
- It can be difficult to separate cause and effect in the relationship between the media and the audience





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- Discussions by politicians and in the media often suggest that 'violent people' consume violent media and then commit acts of violence because of the 'thrill' they get from it.
- An alternative interpretation is that for certain audiences, violent behaviour is something they are socially programmed to enjoy, whether it is real or imaginary.
- It has also been suggested that violence in the media may be a relief (cathartic) > playing a computer game as a non-violent way of releasing anger and aggression.
- People may also be **sensitised** to violence by the media. E.g. demands for greater gun control in the USA after school shooting on 14 February 2018 in Florida.





Arguments and evidence about the extent to which violent media leads to violent behaviour

- All attempts to prove a link between media and violent behaviour are limited by the fact that people behaved violently throughout history, and before there were mass media
- In fact, despite recent wars such as that in Syria and terrorist attacks, the long-term trend according to **Pinker (2012)** is to a decline in violence.
- Regardless of individual acts such as the Columbine School shooting, the age of the mass media has coincided with less, rather than more, violence.













The impact of the media on crime, including deviance amplification and moral panics

- **Wilkins (1964)** developed the concept of **deviance amplification** to show how the development of crime and deviance involves a positive feedback loop:
 - Initial or primary deviance is identified and condemned by the media, which leads to...
 - the deviant group becoming socially isolated and resentful. The behaviour leads, through a general media labelling process, to...
 - an increased social reaction (including the development of a moral panic) by the media, politicians and formal control agencies. There is less toleration of the original deviant behaviour. This develops into...
 - secondary deviation, involving an increased level of deviance. As a consequence...



The impact of the media on crime, including deviance amplification and moral panics

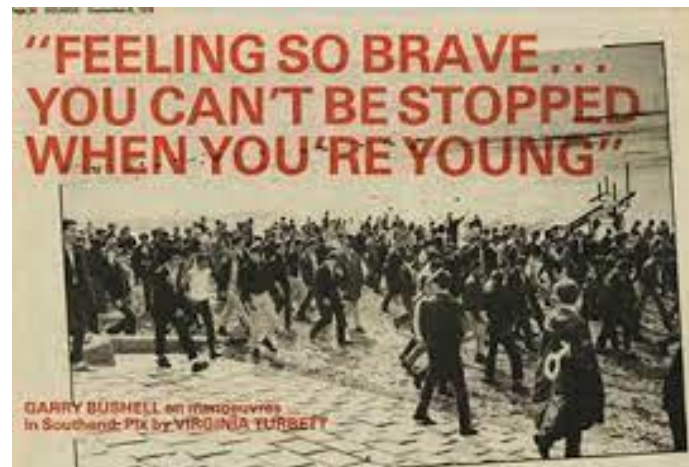
- the reaction from the media, politicians and police increases, leading to new laws (the criminalisation of deviants) or increased police resources to deal with 'the problem'.

The Deviancy Amplification Spiral: Wilkins (1964)	
Spiral	Media interventions
Primary Deviance	Identification [Labelling] Moral Entrepreneurs
 Isolation And Alienation 	Folk Devils [Labelling]
 Increased Social Reaction 	
 Secondary Deviance 	Deviant self-images Deviant career
 Social Reaction 	Moral Panic / Clampdown / Crusade
Increased Deviance	



The impact of the media on crime, including deviance amplification and moral panics

- In this way, each group, deviant and control, feeds off the action of the other to create a 'spiral of deviance'. Moral panics created by the media are a crucial component of this.
- The idea of moral panic was developed by **Stanley Cohen (1972)**. In his case study, the moral panic was focused on two teenage groups who became 'folk devils', standing for everything that was supposedly going wrong in the UK in the 1960s. The panic leads to demands on police, politicians and others to act strongly against the folk devils.





The impact of the media on crime, including deviance amplification and moral panics

- The role of the media in the development of moral panics is explained differently by different sociological approaches.
- According to **interpretivist approach**, moral panics develop spontaneously out of the general public concern towards behaviour that threatens the moral order. Cohen: moral panics reinforce established moral values in two ways:
 - By setting moral boundaries for acceptable behaviour.
 - By creating a sense of social and moral solidarity at a time of change and uncertainty.
- This approach sees the media as a channel that amplifies, rather than creates, public concern. Media audiences are seen as active and critical consumers. If an audience chooses to ignore media concerns, a deviancy amplification spiral does not occur.





The impact of the media on crime, including deviance amplification and moral panics

- **Neo-Marxist approaches** are interested in how and why moral panics are created by the powerful and how they contribute to the maintenance of hegemony. They see moral panics as political phenomena - the defence of a certain type of moral order defined by a ruling class.
- For **Hall et al.**, opportunities of moral panics occur at times of economic, political and ideological crises in capitalist society. Their function is to distract public attention from the real causes of such crises by generating panics around groups and behavior that create easily identifiable scapegoats or folk devils. The real purpose of moral panics is control of the whole population, not just the folk devils.
- Each panic results in greater levels of control until a situation is reached where surveillance and control is an integral part of everyday life. Ensuring 'public safety' means maintenance of hegemony for neo-Marxists.



The impact of the media on crime, including deviance amplification and moral panics



- Why is the behaviour of young males frequently the object of media moral panics?





Ways in which the media might have a positive impact on human behaviour

- Some of positive impacts are related to the uses and gratification model:
 1. Diversions - everyday purposes, such as relaxation or entertainment
 2. Education - consciously or unconsciously
 3. Community - a significant basis for social interaction
 4. Identity consolidation - for some, the media are used for identity checking on two levels:
 - Individual
 - Social
 5. Empowerment - allows greater freedom of personal expression and identity creation (feminist view)
 - **Haraway (1991):** concept of the 'cyborg'





Ways in which the media might have a positive impact on human behaviour

- Some of positive impacts are related to the uses and gratification model:
 6. Awareness - news and information of:
 - economic trends
 - political developments
 - cultural exchanges.
- The media may also promote political changes.
- **Lyotard** argues that a defining feature of postmodernity is its disbelief (incredulity) towards metanarratives: the media is less likely to influence people's behaviour negatively.
- The ability to make quick, easy and direct contact with like-minded individuals through new media contributes to greater participation and activism.
- New media also change the nature of political representation.
- Both, political leaders and transnational corporations are under the surveillance 'from below'.



Ways in which people may be affected by media sensationalism and stereotyping

- **Sensationalism** means the reporting of news stories in ways that make the audience worried or excited, rather than reporting accurately.
- Sensationalised stories :often involve bias, distortion and exaggeration.
- Sensationalism is one of the factors in the reporting that makes some news stories into moral panics.





Ways in which people may be affected by media sensationalism and stereotyping

- **Stereotyping** may affect both stereotyped and audiences receiving the stereotype. Media effects models suggest that audiences will be influenced by stereotypes and may assume that they are accurate.
- For media producers, stereotypes are useful shortcuts because they provide information to audiences very quickly.
- Stereotypes can imply that the groups being stereotyped are in some way very inferior and bad - a negative or dehumanising representation.
- Some media products, however, set out to challenge or reverse stereotypes. E.g. representations of females.
- The ways that audiences are affected by stereotypes may depend on their knowledge of the stereotyped group.

