

Chapter 2

A History of Violence in the Media

One of the earliest pieces of literature is the Epic of Gilgamesh, early Sumerian versions of which date back as far as 2000BCE or so (Hallo & Simpson, 1971). This tale follows the legend of the Sumerian king Gilgamesh who, like the King Arthur legends later, appears to have been based loosely on a historical figure. Gilgamesh, according to the tale, is a powerful and harsh ruler who, among other things, forces new brides to have sex with him on their wedding night. The gods send a wild-man, Enkidu, to pester Gilgamesh in punishment, and ultimately the two fight violently, ending in something of a draw. The two men become friends and Enkidu acts as a positive influence on Gilgamesh, softening his more vicious instincts. They proceed to battle demons, tangle with Ishtar, the cruel goddess of love and war whose sexual advances Gilgamesh declines, and search for the secrets of immortality. The story is rife with unapologetic violence and sexual themes. *Gilgamesh* is perhaps the best known of the early Sumerian legends that have survived, but themes of heroic adventure, violence, sex, rape, and cruelty are not uncommon among other Sumerian stories (Hallo & Simpson, 1971). Exactly what the Sumerian people thought of these violent stories is not well known, but their survival alone gives testament to their popularity. Things, for the media, have arguably not changed very much since the time of *Gilgamesh*.

The twentieth century saw an unprecedented explosion of mass media. Prior to the late 1800s, the only form of mass media was literature. Before 1439 with the invention of the printing press, even literature was expensive and difficult to come by. The “average” person through most of history largely had to get by with music and oral storytelling or live action media such as plays or even gladiatorial combats. One might argue that “mass media” at times experienced a little flourish, such as during the proliferation of theaters in Greek civilization, or Coliseum games in Rome. Yet it is safe to say that mass media, in the sense that we have come to know it today, is a comparatively modern phenomenon.

Nonetheless, modern mass media differs from its historical antecedents more with regard to technology than in content. Across history and across cultures, the stories which people have used to entertain one another, whether written or oral,

were saturated with violent and sexual themes, sometimes unapologetically covering topics such as rape or incest that might seem taboo in modern Western society (Trend, 2007).

This chapter concerns itself with the history of violent media. It is sometimes insinuated that modern culture is unusually awash with violent entertainment. In evaluating the modern sociology of media violence and societal reactions to it, it is helpful to understand the history of such phenomena. This chapter is designed to help the reader understand trends in media and mass media consumption through human history.

2.1 Violence in Premodern Media: The Greeks and Romans

Psychology has arguably been at the forefront of efforts to link violent mass media with societal violence, particularly among youth and adolescents. It is perhaps somewhat ironic then, that psychology's "mascot" myth, of *Psyche and Cupid* is a tale rife with themes related to cruelty and sexuality if not outright violence with two young people at the center. The Greek myths in general featured gods and heroes who were deeply flawed, violent, avaricious, and sometimes cruel. Popular stories such as Homer's still commonly studied *Illiad* and *Odyssey* were thickly populated with heroic acts of violence, as well as cruel vicious acts. Greek plays by authors such as Sophocles and Euripides oftentimes included themes of violence, sex, and betrayal, and such plays were widely popular and continue to be produced to the current day.

From this time period we see some of the first negative commentaries on media violence, particularly that in plays. Plato appears to have suggested a ban on plays and poetry out of concern that these art forms could corrupt young minds and cause great harm (Griswold, 2004), although speaking in his dialogues he may only have been portraying common beliefs rather than necessarily endorsing them. Plato seems to be one of the first to put in writing the often-repeated conclusion that children and adolescents, in particular, are unable to distinguish reality from fiction. His mentor, Socrates, appears to have considered even the alphabet itself to be potentially corrupting to the young mind (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967). By contrast Aristotle (who oftentimes seemed to disagree with Plato) argued that music, poetry, plays, and art could have a cathartic effect on the viewer, in effect, causing them to become less aggressive (Aristotle, 2004/350BC). From these two thinkers of antiquity we can already see the two main lines of reasoning regarding media violence. One argues that exposure to media violence can have a harmful effect in promoting aggression and poor mental functioning among youth, whereas the other argues that media violence exposure might lead to relaxation and venting of aggression.

In comparison to modern mass media such as violent movies or video games, the Greek tragedies, despite their dark themes, may seem somewhat tame. The graphic nature of violent acts was limited by the practical realities of putting on a live play if nothing else. However, the Romans infused a new element into violent mass media by presenting popular and well-attended games that involved gladiatorial

combats, which sometimes, although not always, ended with the death of one gladiator, the slaughter of wild beasts, and the vicious public execution of criminals, oftentimes using creative and cruel means (Wells, 1995). Such games were enormous public spectacles, with spectators coming from all social classes and ages. During the time of Nero, the games were altered to include plays, in which condemned men would play the part of characters that died in the play. During the death scene, these individuals would actually be slain (Coleman, 1990). Musicians playing accompanying scores, ticket scalpers, and product endorsements by the gladiators were all common elements of the games. The Roman games take media violence to a level unprecedented in history and rarely seen since. Seldom has the blatant spilling of real blood been permitted solely for the purposes of entertainment.

Not surprisingly, the Roman games were not without their critics. The Roman orator and playwright Seneca argued that attending the games increased aggression and greed (Seneca, 64). Christian writers also wrote about the games. Christian authors such as Tertullian (200) and Augustine (397) comment regarding their potential negative influences on the moral integrity of spectators. Indeed, as Christian moralizing became an early and consistent source of criticism regarding the moral effects of media violence, it is tempting to consider how these religious and cultural beliefs continue to guide the debate on media violence into the present day, particularly as most research on the subject continues to be produced primarily within the Christian-majority USA (see Cumberbach, 2008).

Romans also appear to have continued to believe that speech could have a corrupting influence on youth. For instance one Carneades of Cyrene was expelled from Rome for giving a speech arguing against the virtue of justice, the point of which seems to have been that any position might be convincingly argued no matter how absurd. This point, lost on the crowd, resulted in his immediate ejection from the city in fear that he might have corrupted the youth to engage in immoral behavior (Pagden, 2008).

2.2 Medieval Literature and the Printing Press

With the fall of the Western Roman Empire, the huge organized games and public theatrical displays become somewhat less common. Yet the production of Western literature ranging from *Beowulf* (approximately eighth- to ninth century) to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of England* (1138, featuring the King Arthur legends) to Dante's *Inferno* (1302) to the plays of Shakespeare continued to demonstrate continued human interest in subjects related to violence. The re-emergence of popular plays in the later Middle Ages represents an essential return to the Grecian variant on mass media. Although there was no clear revival of the Roman games, the popularity of jousting tournaments or public executions (which were considered public entertainment) may have largely filled the same role, if in a less organized manner. Public outcries regarding jousting in particular came from the Roman Catholic Church (National Jousting Association, 2008) although these concerns appeared to focus on a variety of issues, from the potential for loss of life to their distracting knights from crusades. Despite attempts to ban the sport, it remained popular into the seventeenth century.

A considerable amount of concern arose over what today would likely be considered an unusual source of alarm: the Christian Bible. The invention of movable type in 1452 allowed for mass printing. Coupled with the brewing religious reformations, a market quickly emerged for non-Latin translations of the Bible. Previously the Bible was only available in Latin, and typically restricted to clergy. Translations of the Bible had been banned as early as 1199 by Pope Innocent III in response to several heretical movements. For instance the English translated Bible produced by William Tyndale (1524) was criticized for purposely mistranslating several words in order to promote anti-clericalism (e.g., anti-Roman Catholicism). Tyndale was ultimately burned at the stake for his translation (Daniell, 2004). It was thought that these translated Bibles would promote moral decrepitude, primarily by turning people away from the Catholic Church toward a heretical view of an individualized relationship with God. Translation, sale, or possession of banned Bibles was often-times met with severe penalties, including death.

Case Study: William Tyndale

William Tyndale (1494–1536) was an English biblical reformer and important figure in the Protestant reformation. Tyndale was openly opposed to the Roman Catholic Church and the papacy, believing many Catholic doctrines, such as the admiration of the pope and saints, and the intercession of the church and supremacy of the pope to be heretical to the origins of Christianity. Naturally, this did not endear Tyndale to Catholic hierarchy in England, which was still Catholic during most of Tyndale's life.

Finding much opposition in England, Tyndale traveled to Germany, where Martin Luther's Reformation ideas were influential. There he began his translation of the Bible, beginning with the New Testament into English. These translations were considered heretical and it was alleged that Tyndale purposefully misinterpreted the original texts that he was translating from in order to support his Reformation views of Christianity. Debate continues to rage in regard to the source of Tyndale's original texts and the accuracy of his translations. Henry VIII of England attempted to have Tyndale hunted down, but Tyndale had many supporters in Germany and remained in hiding.

Tyndale was ultimately betrayed by a colleague, possibly to agents of the English king. He was imprisoned in modern-day Belgium, put on trial for heresy and convicted. He was sentenced to be strangled to death. On October 6, 1536, the sentence was carried out and his body then burned at the stake. Nonetheless the influence of his translations continued, having considerable impact on the later King James Bible in English.

The creation of the printing press and movable type with continued improvements over ensuing years made literature available to greater and greater numbers of people, as books became cheaper to print and sell. Literature became, in effect,

the prime source of “mass media.” As literature became more common it became more varied, including forms designed to appeal directly to the prurient interest of readers in sex and violence, rather than aiming for any particular literary value. By the sixteenth century “true crime” books began to appear which gruesomely detailed the events of crimes as well as the brutal executions of the offenders (Trend, 2007). These books appear to have satisfied both a public attraction to violent depictions as well as providing a sense of justice and warning to would-be offenders. During the same time period some complained that popular folk songs presented criminals as heroes (Pearson, 1983).

By the seventeenth century books emerged that began to resemble novels. One of the first, and most well-known, is *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, something of a comic piece about a country gentleman who descends into fantasy, believing he is a medieval knight. Though certainly popular then as now, *Don Quixote* was met with a certain disdain about the quality and impact of chivalric romance novels (Kirschenbaum, 2007). By the eighteenth century we begin to see the introduction of the modern novel (Trend, 2007). This time period also sees a new influx of concerns regarding the impact of literature on reader morality. In 1776 one Joseph Hanway, an English philanthropist, stated that newspapers and other “debasement amusements” were responsible for, as he put it, “the host of thieves which of late years has invaded us” (Cumberbach, 2008). The publication of Samuel Richardson’s novel *Pamela* in 1741 was condemned for its “lewd” content and for assaulting the principles of virtue (Trend, 2007). Through the nineteenth century, novels continued to be a source of concern both with regard to quality and potential impact on readers, particularly women readers who, it was thought, could not adequately distinguish reality from fiction (Kirschenbaum, 2007).

Common and cheap forms of literature increased in popularity in the nineteenth century with “dime novels,” cheap oftentimes lurid works that were questioned with regard to their quality as well as their impact. Similarly, “penny dreadfuls,” essentially early comic books, begin to emerge, many of them hinging upon violent or horror themes. *Varney the Vampire* (see Prest, 1847 for an archived copy) was one of the early popular stories, following the exploits of a vampire who loathed his own condition. These penny dreadfuls were seen as increasing immorality, particularly among young boys (Cumberbach, 2008).

Concern over the effects of media typically arose from “elite” groups such as politicians and academics, who would use media forms to attempt to explain social problems (Trend, 2007), often implying that the past, pre-media, periods in history were comparatively problem free. It should be noted, however, that archaeological evidence suggests that violence was rather common in even prehistorical societies devoid of modern media (McCall & Shields, 2008). Increasingly, social commentators began to posit the effects of media such as novels and newspapers as being responsible for a disastrous wave of violence and immorality particularly among the young (Trend, 2007). Oftentimes nonelite groups, such as low socioeconomic status (SES) working class children and immigrant groups were seen as particularly vulnerable to the pernicious effects of media violence. Scientific and medical terms were adopted more and more often by social critics to equate their moral beliefs

with scientific reasoning and infuse greater immediacy to the potential problems of violent media. Concerns about media also came to focus increasingly on their alleged affects on young minds in particular.

2.3 The Advent of Motion Pictures

The late nineteenth century saw the advent of film media, now making visual depictions of violence available to mass audiences. In particular, film tricks began to make possible a host of gruesome effects that were difficult to reproduce in plays. Thomas Edison produced a brief film, *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots* in which a woman is shown having her head lopped off. James Williamson's *Attack on a China Mission Station* from 1900 presents a longer continuous sequence in which British missionaries are violently attacked by Chinese Boxer rebels. *The Great Train Robbery* became one of the most famous of these early films, and is noted for its high level of violence and for ending with the villain firing his pistol directly into the camera (Kutner & Olson, 2008). Early films were largely unregulated with regard to content and considerable violence and even nudity were certainly not unheard of. Interestingly, this early period of unregulated cinema was met with a comparable downturn in violent crimes within the USA (Ferguson, 2002).

Despite the fact that the emergence of film did not engender a wave of violence, concerns about its impact quickly emerged. The purported effect of this new media on adolescent minds was an issue of particular concern. In response to early governmental efforts to censor film media, film companies responded by forming the National Board of Review (NBR), whose primary purpose was self-regulation of violent and sexual content. Films which contained excessive violence or sexual imagery were failed by the NBR. This early regulatory effort took place during a general period of moral panic over the effects of media, alcohol, immigrants, and other perceived assaults to conventional morality (Trend, 2007). It is tempting to wonder whether concerns about media violence, drug or alcohol use, sexuality, immigration, and other "moral" issues occur together in consistent patterns throughout history. For instance concerns regarding movies in the 1930s co-occurred with the temperance movement and a backlash against the "flapper" movement of the 1920s where young people may have appeared particularly rebellious to society's elders. Concerns about television in the 1980s occurred alongside the "War on Drugs," anti-immigration movements, and anti-pornography movements. Moral crusades of this sort appear to be rooted in the sense of "inerrancy" of a particular set of beliefs...or more plainly the view that some groups have that their moral beliefs are correct, and those of other groups are wrong (Sherkat & Ellison, 1997).

The advent of film set off an explosion of mass media, as film as followed by radio, mass-produced music, television, commercially available pornography in various forms, and finally video games and other "interactive" media such as the Internet. Surprisingly, although it is generally assumed that the consumption of media violence increased across the twentieth century, there is no research that actually

empirically examines media violence trends regarding actual violent content across time, nor is there any research examining the degree to which media violence trends are predictive of violence in society, data on which would be the cornerstone of any argument that media violence relates to societal violence.

Media companies in the USA have generally moved to head off unfriendly legislation by offering to police themselves. Although this practice may sound dubious in efficacy, in the early twentieth century, the result was the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America board (also called the Hays commission after its director Will Hays). The Hays Code (1930) stated that “Hence, though regarding motion pictures primarily as entertainment without any explicit purpose of teaching or propaganda, they know that the motion picture within its own field of entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking” and provided the foundation upon which the content of films was regulated through the 1960s. Graphic depictions of violence, the techniques of murder or other crimes, smuggling and drug trafficking, the use of liquor (unless required by the plot), revenge, safecracking, train robberies, adultery (which was not to be presented as an attractive option), inter-rational relationships, sexually transmitted diseases, nudity, and even “lustful kissing” were all forbidden or strictly controlled under the Hays Commission. The Hays Commission was an internal attempt by the motion picture industry to regulate itself and, far from proving to be a self-serving interest, it greatly restricted the kinds of sexual and violent depictions permissible in films. One of its more infamous acts was in taming the cartoon character Betty Boop from a carefree, scantily clad flapper into a wholesome husbandless housewife in a full dress, which naturally doomed the comic.

Social science research regarding the adverse effects of films began in roughly the same period of the 1930s. Perhaps most famous of these were the Payne Fund studies (Blummer, 1933) which purported to find a link between movie viewing and juvenile delinquency. Setting the stage for debates that would occur over the next century, critics of the Payne Fund studies noted the lack of control groups, difficulties in validly measuring aggression, and sampling problems as limiting their usefulness (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Taking a “blank slate” approach on child development, the Payne Fund studies provided considerable fuel to the fire of belief that media exposure could harm youth.

Concerns over the impact of violent media on youth violence resurfaced in the 1950s for several reasons. Youth films such as *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955) were seen as promoting juvenile delinquency (Trend, 2007). Despite violent crime rates in the 1950s reaching historic lows, concern over the insidious effects of media became part of a culture paranoid over communism and other “anti-American” influences. A psychiatrist, Dr. Frederic Wertham, published a book called *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954/1996) which claimed that comic books were a major cause of juvenile crime. Although Wertham’s book was anecdotal rather than based on empirical research, it touched off considerable concern, which ultimately came to the attention of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Rather than risk open censorship, the comic book industry, like the movie industry, volunteered to rigidly self-regulate, a move which doomed many comic books with violent content.

2.4 The Rise of Television

As television ownership became more prevalent during the 1950s the potential for visual mass media to reach audiences consistently increased considerably. Radio had already been popular, and some radio shows included violence, although this was narrated, not viewed directly. Television, like movies, was a visual media foremost; unlike movies television could be viewed every day, for hours at end, for ostensibly no cost at all. The potential for viewers to greatly increase their diet of mass media, and violent media specifically, was apparent. Shows with violent content, including Westerns such as *Bonanza* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* and crime shows such as *Dragnet* quickly became popular. As the advent of widespread television consumption in the 1950s was followed, in the USA, by a precipitous rise in violent crime a decade and a half later, many commentators were given to wondering whether the introduction of television—and violent television specifically—might partially explain the rise in violent crime in the USA beginning in the mid-1960s (e.g., Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Yet this violent crime rise appears to have been fairly unique to the USA, with other countries introducing violent television seeing no similar violent crime rises (Ferguson, 2002). The example of the island of St. Helena provided an interesting opportunity to test the effects of introducing television. St. Helena received television access for the first time in 1995. Aggression in schoolchildren was tracked for the period just before and just after television's introduction (Charton, Gunter, & Coles, 1998). Rather surprisingly, aggression among school children *decreased* in the 2-year period following the introduction of television. Nonetheless a more long-term follow up might produce different results.

Criminologists tend to discuss the crime increases beginning in the 1960s (which ultimately declined beginning in the 1990s, see Federal Bureau of Investigations, 1951–2011) as due to multiple factors including civil strife and the counterculture movement, the Vietnam War, racial disparities, a downturn in the economy, increased poverty, and increased availability and trade in illicit drugs, among other factors (see Savage, 2008). Nonetheless the apparent correlation (which has not been actually demonstrated statistically) between the increased use of television in the 1950s and increased crime in the 1960s became fodder for the debates on the impact of violent media.

Probably the single most influential group of studies relating to the media violence debate were the “Bo-bo Doll” studies of Albert Bandura (Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961, 1963). There are actually numerous variations on these sets of studies, but in brief they had children (males and females) watch adults (also males and females) either in real life or in filmed sequences engage in a series of highly novel acts against a bo-bo doll (and inflatable toy doll which is designed to be boxed or hit). So, for instance, the models would sit on the bo-bo doll and punch it in the nose, or whack it with a mallet. The researchers then irritated the children by showing them a host of toys that they were not allowed to play with before bringing them to the test room with the bo-bo doll. Children who had seen an adult model these behaviors

(either in real life or in film) were more likely to engage in similar behaviors. Although the bo-bo doll studies are not media violence studies per se, they purport to demonstrate that aggression can be imitated by children. Clearly, these results would potentially be generalizable to television and other media forms.

However, there are limitations to the bo-bo doll studies that are important to acknowledge (see Gauntlett, 1995). First, the effects appear to be small overall and evaporate very quickly. Secondly, the “aggression” in the study was directed at an object, not another person, and it remains unclear if the studies’ results can be generalized to real-life aggression against people. Related to that is the concern that the entire situation is contrived; after all, one might ask, what else are you supposed to do with a bo-bo doll other than hit it? Third, it is unclear whether the children were necessarily more motivated to engage in aggression in general, as opposed to mimicking *specific* aggressive acts. In other words, overall aggressive behaviors may not have changed much, but the style of the aggressive behaviors might have been altered due to the novel kinds of aggressive behaviors presented. Fourth, it is unclear that the children were necessarily motivated by aggression, as opposed to aggressive play or even the desire to please the adult experimenter. Children are quite used to being given instructions by adults and they may arguably have simply viewed the models (who were adults) as instructors telling them what to do. In other words, the children may have even believed that they might be scolded or punished if they didn’t follow the model’s lead. Lastly, in a subsequent paper, Bandura (1965) found that showing the model being punished for attacking the bo-bo doll decreased modeled behaviors in child participants. Yet the punishments themselves appeared to involved considerable aggressive behavior. As described in the original text (Bandura, 1965. p. 591):

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

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

Beginning in the late 1990s, televisions began to become equipped with V-chip technology. This technology allowed viewers to block shows with violent or sexual content, based on ratings so children and adolescents would be unable to access such content. The V-Chip is only used by a minority of parents however (15 % according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004), leading to debate as to why. It may be that parents are unaware of the V-Chip, or do not know how to use it, or that they are aware of the V-Chip but do not feel it is necessary for them to monitor their children’s viewing habits. A follow up Kaiser Family Foundation study (2007)

found that the majority of parents felt competent in monitoring their children's viewing habits, whether or not they used the V-Chip. Meanwhile, the conservative activist group *Parents' Television Council* (2007) has condemned the V-chip, suggesting that the ratings are too lenient regarding violent and sexual content.

2.5 The Age of Video Games

Video games began to appear in the 1970s, entering homes with the release of the Atari 2600 console in 1977. Most early games were of low technical quality, although machine on machine violence (e.g., *Space Invaders*) was a common theme. The pixilation of early machines such as the Atari 2600 made representing humans difficult, although *Raiders of the Lost Arc* (1982), while arguably somewhat clunky, was one of the first to include person on person violence. In arcades the game *Death Race* (1976), which involved driving a car over humanoid "gremlins" had earlier raised considerable controversy. On personal computers and game consoles, games such as *Swashbuckler* (1982), *Chiller* (1986), *Castle Wolfenstein* (1981) and *Spy vs. Spy* (1984) began introducing person on person violence into games, at differing levels of graphicness (*Chiller* for instance, was far more graphic than, say *Spy vs. Spy*). Nonetheless, controversy over these games remained somewhat minimal, perhaps eclipsed as they were by the controversies over the paper-and-pencil role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* (see Cardwell, 1994) which some argued might lead to aggression, Satanism or psychosis in youth. Oddly, as *Dungeons and Dragons* is even more interactive than early video games in that players actually take on the role of their characters, little research has examined the potential impact of *Dungeons and Dragons*, although there appears to be little evidence that the emergence of the game touched off a youth violence wave let alone schizophrenia or Satanism.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, video games increased in technological ability, allowing for better and more graphic representations of humans and humanoids, as well as displays of brutal injuries. The first, arguably, was *Street Fighter* (1987) followed by *Mortal Kombat* (1992) and *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) and, finally *Doom* (1993). All of these games received considerable criticism for the high levels of violence included as well as their graphicness. The activist David Grossman (1995) argued that video games with violence functioned like Army simulators which improved shooting ratios among infantrymen. Grossman argued that soldiers during WWII were relatively unlikely to fire their weapons in combat, prompting the Army to use simulators to "train" soldiers to shoot at human targets. However, it should be noted that Grossman fails to acknowledge that it is difficult to compare the WWII, poorly trained (relative to the modern professional army) conscript soldier, firing semiautomatic weapons, to the modern professional, volunteer, highly trained soldier using automatic weapons in a meaningful way.

Yet Grossman's fears appeared realized during the Columbine High Massacre in 1999 when adolescents Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 12 students, a teacher, and themselves. Harris and Klebold had been avid fans of *Doom*

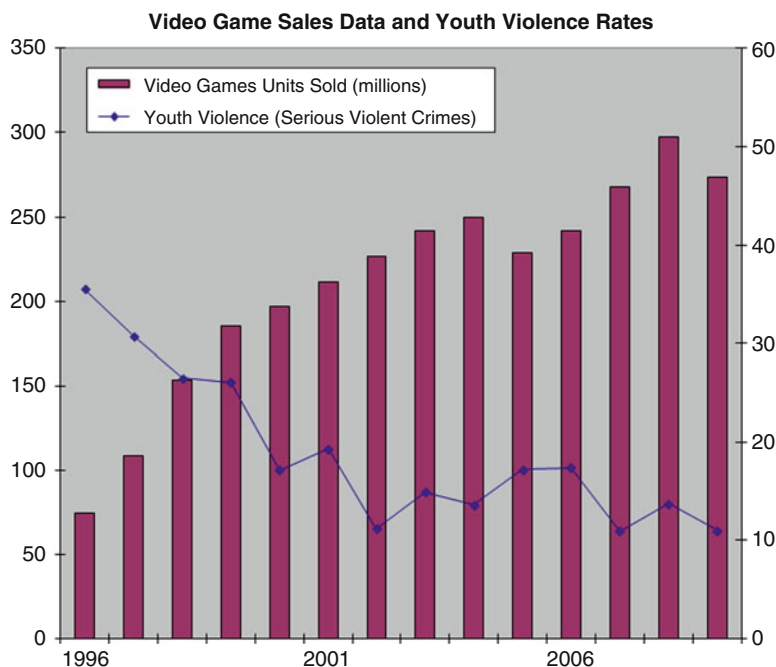


Fig. 2.1 Youth violence and video game sales data. *Note:* The correlation coefficient for this relationship is $r = -0.95$

(although they had not designed levels of *Doom* that appeared like their high school as had sometimes been reported).

Congressional hearings on the impact of video games in the 1990's sparked the video game industry to form the Entertainment Software Ratings Board to rate all video games for violent and sexual content. The ESRB provides content labels for all games, effectively following the self-regulation efforts pioneered by the motion picture and comic book industries. The ESRB ratings system has received approval from the Federal Trade Commission (2007) with the caveat that video game companies refrain from marketing adult-rated titles to minors. However, the advocacy group National Institute of Media and the Family in their "Video Game Report Card" (NIMF, 2007) had been critical of the ESRB, claiming that the ESRB ratings are not strict enough. At the same time, not surprisingly, game makers sometimes complain that the ESRB is too strict. Exactly what standards should be used to rate media remains highly subjective. The ESRB shot back that it was the NIMF report that was flawed, and inconsistent with the FTC's generally supportive appraisal of the ESRB (Gamepolitics, 2007). The NIMF has since ceased to operate.

As the controversy over video games increased, paradoxically the rate of violence in the USA (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1951–2011) including among youth (Childstats.gov, 2011) decreased, as presented in Fig. 2.1. School shootings, despite receiving increased attention, were also on the decline (see also Bureau of

Justice Statistics, 2008 for university crime data) contrary to the perception of many in the public. It was observed that almost all young males play violent games (Griffiths & Hunt, 1995) questioning the meaningfulness of “links” between violent video games and some school shooters. A report by the US Secret Service and US Department of Education (2002) found that, far from being heavy consumers of violent media, school shooters appeared in general to have fairly average to low-average interest in such media, and that an interest in violent media was not a good predictor of school shootings.

At the beginning of the new millennium considerable controversy remains over the proliferation of violence on television, movies, music, and new media such as video games and the Internet. It is unlikely that the controversies over media violent impact are to be resolved in the near future, or that consensus will be reached regarding the importance of media violence as a causal contributor to societal violence.

2.6 Conclusion

Violence in entertainment has been a perennial facet of media since the beginning of human history. The best evidence suggests that humans, across cultures and epochs, have had an interest in violent entertainment, constrained only by the availability of delivery systems for mass media. So too, however, conservative elements of society have often criticized violent entertainment in various forms as potentially corrupting of youth. As such, we can understand current debates about violent entertainment, whether or not they have merit, as part of a long-standing debate and struggle between elements of society attempting to control or constrain the flow of entertainment media, often as a part of larger social agendas. Understanding this history of media violence helps set the stage for our coverage of current debates on this topic.

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