

# 'We all have role to play in cleaning up media's bad act'

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by John S. Caputo

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Over the past 40 years, more than 2,000 scientific studies have indicated the harmful effects of violence in film, television, music content, video and computer games. The research on media violence has been carried on at prestigious universities and has been reported on by the American Medical Association, the American Psychological Association, and most recently in the three year National Television Violence Study sponsored by the Cable Television Industry.

The last study summarizes more than 40 years of research and was sponsored by the very cable industry that brings television into most of our homes. A summary of the conclusions are that viewers of media violence have:

Increased aggressiveness and anti-social behavior.

Increased fear of becoming a victim.

Increased desensitization to violence and victims of violence.

Increased appetite for more violence in entertainment and real life.

The data are clear. By age 16, the average child has seen 16,000 murders on TV alone. Acts of violence exceed 11 per hour on evening TV. By the end of high school, the average student has spent 11,000 hours in the classroom, watched 15,000 hours of television, listened to 10,500 hours of popular music, seen 350,000 commercials, and witnessed 18,000 violent media deaths.

We all share responsibility for the culture we are creating and passing on to our children. In order to take responsibility, however, we have to start with knowledge. Perhaps a good place to begin is with certain media myths.

**Myth No.1:** *I saw lots of television when I was a kid and I turned out O.K.*

First, media violence 1999 style is much different than media violence in the '50s through the '80s. Second, it is clear that we all do not become aggressive but we are still affected by viewing violence over many years. The issue is not whether we as individuals turn out OK, but whether our society turns out OK.

**Myth No.2:** *Media violence simply reflects what's going on in real life.*

Media messages are more than mirrors. Research repeatedly shows that sensationalized news coverage of murders, rapes and disasters is far out of proportion to their frequency in real life.

**Myth No.3:** *Violence is a natural part of drama.*

Some argue that watching violence can reduce anger and violent impulses in certain individuals.

There is no comparison between Hamlet and superheroes in video game and film entertainment. Great drama depicts violence as the rise and fall of a character who eventually recognizes and regrets his or her terrible acts. Action-adventure entertainment makes violence an end unto itself. Those who use violence feel no remorse.

**Myth No.4:** *Decisions about viewing media violence should be up to parents.*

Parents have the right to expect society to support their child-rearing efforts with public policies that reduce risk to children. This includes mediamakers and owners who control what floods our cultural landscape in the images of pop culture.

**Myth No.5:** *We live in a free country that constitutionally protects free speech.*

The First Amendment must be preserved and protected. But what is to be done when one's free speech endangers another's personal safety? Research clearly indicates that violence in media creates a danger for the public. We no longer allow Amos and Andy stereotypes of African-Americans or negative images of women. Gruesome and gratuitous sex and violence can easily be added to the list of creative elements mediamakers need to carefully evaluate.

**Myth No.6:** *Violence is what people want to see.*

Violent programs do not grab the greatest ratings. Violence in entertainment is used as a marketing strategy by multinational corporations whose products must travel across many languages and cultures. Violence travels well. Violence - both in media and real life - may not be America's finest export, but it is our most visible one.

By dispelling these myths we can begin to break the circle of blame about the media by engaging millions of people in an empowerment process that leads from awareness to action on key issues in the media debate.

**First**, discover and articulate your own experiences about the media. This encourages you to think about your daily interactions with media.

**Second**, questions the political, economic, social or cultural causes that make the media the way they are - economics, First Amendment concerns, cultural breakdown of many families, etc.

**Third**, move beyond the way the media are, to how we want them to be.

**Fourth**, formulate constructive action ideas that will lead to personal changes in your own media habits, as well as working for change locally, nationally or globally.

The recent hearings in Washington have again called for further studies of media violence. I hope this is not just another delaying tactic because, unfortunately, we already know the answer to the research and we already know that what has happened will happen again. To say and do nothing is to contribute to an unhealthy media culture.

The goal should be helping to raise healthy kids for a healthy community. We can all make a difference.

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