

# The Mass Media's Negative Effects on Society

Mary Rees NISHIO

*Faculty of Science,*

*Okayama University of Science,*

*Ridai-cho 1-1, Okayama 700, Japan*

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## ABSTRACT

Evidence presented indicates that there are a number of ways in which the various mass media have been exerting a negative influence on society. Strong evidence exists which demonstrates a link between the viewing of violence or crime and the imitation of this behavior. A link has also been established between media viewing and suicide, domestic violence, delinquency, and use of the media by convicts for acquiring crime techniques. A number of homicides have been connected with direct imitation of mass media carried incidents. An alarming increase in mass murders is linked with the reinforcement power of the media. It is suggested that the powerful reinforcement potential of the media appears to be contributing to an increase in antisocial behavior and a decrease in socially positive behavior. Social isolation appears to be strongly correlated with prolonged media viewing. It is also argued that increasing use of the negatives of human behavior in order to overcome habituation is seriously distorting traditional societal values worldwide. Prolonged media viewing may also be negatively impacting on physical and mental health.

## INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of the mass media, people learned behavior from those with whom they were in direct contact — parents, siblings, teachers, friends, and those in their immediate environment. Before movies, videos, radio, tapes, computer games, and CDs, the only other major impact on thinking and behavior came through books and newspapers. The situation is now far more complex. The various mass media now provide constant input, not only from sources within the country, but from abroad. There have been alarming changes in the societies of the world in a very short time. Violence and crime are epidemic in some countries and rapidly rising in others. This paper will focus on the mass media's negative impact on society. It will approach this issue from the perspective of the basic principles of psychology.

### 1) PROVISION OF NEGATIVE (FREQUENTLY VIOLENT OR AGGRESSIVE) ROLE MODELS — DIRECT IMITATION OF OBSERVED BEHAVIOR

As discussed in the introduction, people copy the behavior of those around them. However, the mass media has now radically extended the potential number of role models. Sadly, a great many of these role models are negative. These are not kind, generous, self-controlled, law-abiding people. They are often greedy, aggressive, and lacking in self control. The character portrayed in the mass media finds him/herself in a particular emotional situation or has a particular need, and the character responds to the situation or need in a certain way. This behavior is then imitated by the viewer in similar situations. For those who have been raised with firm values and whose character is already formed, the influence may be minimal, but the situation may be quite different for those who have had no education or values education, those who live in poverty, those under extreme stress, those who cannot read and those whose "reality" is largely based on the mass media.

The mass media is not only entertaining or reporting, it is also teaching, and the behavior which it is teaching can be very destructive to society. The crimes shown in Table 1 occurred soon after the incidents were shown as part of dramatic fictional shows (television or video) or in news accounts.

Table 1 Crimes which have been linked directly with the influence of the mass media.

PERSON COMMITTING CRIME	CRIME	SOURCE IMITATED	REFERENCE
Canadian Boy	attempted to extort \$50,000 from a local mayor	learned method from episode of "Starsky & Hutch" (American detective program)	Nettler 1982
Several girls in California	raped a 9-year-old girl on a California beach	The accused admitted they had copied a method of assault seen several days previously in a rape scene in a TV movie	Surette 1990
Assailant unknown	Woman doused with gasoline in Boston and set afire	Occurred following showing of a movie on TV in which teenage boys roam Boston burning tramps	Surette 1990
Male	Husband poured gasoline on sleeping wife and set her afire	Occurred after airing of TV movie in which battered wife pours gasoline on her sleeping husband	Surette 1990
11 yr. male	Murdered postman	Copied killing of postman seen in fictional TV program	Surette 1990
11 yr. male	Strangled 4-year-old girl	Became fascinated by strangulation scenes on television	Toplin 1975
600 people	Phoned in bomb threats	Following news media coverage of May 1981 bombing in New York City's Kennedy Airport	Mazur 1982

Other more recent crimes include the following. In February of 1993 two 10-year-old boys in Liverpool, England lured a 2-year-old toddler away from his mother at a shopping mall and then kicked and beat the child to death. Though a direct connection cannot be proven, shortly before this incident, these boys are said to have rented a brutal video ("Child's Play 3"). Remarkable similarities can be found between parts of this video and the way in which this two-year-old child was murdered (*The Japan Times*, 11 Nov 1993). The boys also worked part-time in a video rental shop. The two boys were the youngest Britons to be convicted of murder since 1748 when a 10-year-old boy strangled a 5-year-old girl (*The Japan Times*, 26 Nov 1993).

A youth named Park Han-sang was recently on trial in Korea for stabbing his parents to death, pouring gasoline over their bodies and setting them afire. Police report that the young man inflicted up to 90 stab wounds on his parents. He has stated that he killed his parents using a method learned from an American movie in order to inherit their wealth and repay \$23,000 in gambling debts which he had accumulated in California. Paik Sang-chung of the Korea Social Pathology Research Center stated that "The unchecked entry of foreign cultures has resulted in great confusion of mores in South Korea as the younger generation grows up accepting foreign ideals without questioning their value. Our society will face a great catastrophe unless the current social trend is reversed" (*The Japan Times*, 14 Oct 1994). It should be noted that the "foreign cultures" which are mentioned here are not the traditional values of America, but those being purveyed by the mass media.

In October of 1994, a 5-year-old girl was found dead in Norway after having been shoved, stoned, kicked unconscious, and left to freeze to death by her 6-year-old playmates. The mother of one of the children involved said "(my child) believes that people can get back up after being beaten down." Norway and its Scandinavian neighbors have blamed violent American television programs and have canceled shows such as "Mighty Morphin Power Rangers" (Note: one wonders about the advisability of even using the word "morphin" in a cartoon aimed at the young when one considers how close it is to "morphine"; many issues related to "classical conditioning" and future drug use arise) which features karate-chopping teens who beat and bash their way through their enemies. Sweden's TV-2 network also suspended broadcast of "The Edge," a 13-part animated program about violence that itself is described as "fast, brutal satire" (*The Japan Times*, 20 Oct 1994).

The American movie "Thelma and Louise" released in 1992 seems to have provided the pattern of behavior for several people. In this movie/video, two women evade the law in a multi-state chase which ends when they commit suicide by driving their car off the rim of the Grand Canyon. On 19 November 1993 a lone motorist drove around the parking lot before returning at high speed and driving off the rim at Grand Canyon. According to the same article, another person had died in a car that went over the rim and another person committed suicide at the Canyon during 1993 (*The Japan Times*, 21 Nov 1993).

Cheryl Stevens, 39, and Jennifer Davis, 33, of Baltimore, Maryland were captured in

Texas after a robbery and high speed chase. A police officer stated that "They've made some remarks in jail that they really wanted us to kill them on the interstate (highway). They had indicated before they invoked their rights that they were headed for the Grand Canyon" (*The Japan Times*, 26 Sept 1994).

### **ABUSED CHILDREN & PREFERENCE FOR VIOLENT PROGRAMS**

Research by Donohue et al (1988) found that physically abused children aged 5 to 12 years watched significantly more TV than non abused subjects and that the abused children identified significantly more violent programs as favorites. The abused children were found to have less crystallized value systems and social cognitive skills than non abused children. It is truly terrifying that these children who have been so severely traumatized are being "programmed" with large amounts of violence and mass media generated values. Psychologists and criminologists are well aware of the connection between abuse as a child and later criminal behavior. Also frightening in this regard is the statistic that 40 to 70% of adult psychiatric patients are survivors of abuse (Briere & Runtz 1987; Biere & Zaidi 1989; Bryer et al. 1987; Carmen et al. 1984; Jacobson & Richardson 1987).

### **TELEVISED SPORTS & VIOLENCE**

It should be noted that violence in the mass media also includes certain sports events. White (1989) examined the effect of National Football League playoff games played from 1973 to 1979 and the relative incidence of homicides in the areas of the playoff teams. The results showed that the areas with the losing teams experienced significantly more homicides than the areas with the winning teams. Homicide rates have also been found to increase following championship prize fights (Miller et al 1991).

### **INCREASE IN SUICIDES FOLLOWING TELEVISION REPORTS OR FICTIONAL PROGRAMS INVOLVING SUICIDE**

It is well established that suicide rates increase following mass media coverage of suicides, particularly among teenagers. Research has also shown that mass murder/suicides which are publicized lead to increases in the suicide rate (Stack 1989).

### **MASS MEDIA VIOLENCE AND DELINQUENCY**

The previously mentioned examples are the more extreme and dramatic examples of imitation of television. A number of studies have found that children who view aggression on television shows demonstrate increases in aggressive behavior (Sansone & di Muccio 1993). Research in Germany (Lukesch 1988) found significant correlations between the amount of deviant behavior and three violence-viewing indices (especially cinema and video violence viewing) which the author interpreted as suggesting a causal impact of media use on delinquency. This effect was discussed in relation to observational learning and the impact of peer culture.

## SEVERE STRESS & VIOLENCE

Television and other mass media provide a variety of behaviors which can be modeled. It must be emphasized that the problem is not limited to aggressive or violent behavior. However, it is these latter types of behavior which have received the most attention. There is considerable research which clearly demonstrates that the viewing of violence in television programs, videos, movies, and other types of mass media often results in increases in aggressive behavior (Wood et al 1991, Heath et al 1989, Comstock & Strasburger 1990). A number of studies show not only that viewing of violence increases aggressive behavior in various age groups, but that it also increases aggressive cognitions (Bushman & Geen 1990). Internal physiological responsiveness (systolic blood pressure) has also been found to increase when viewing violent videos (Bushman & Geen 1990). In other words, aggressive feelings and internal responsiveness may be aroused, but may not always be expressed in behavior due to inhibition by other social influences.

Most terrifying when one considers the effect of the mass media is in its affect on those who are under severe mental stress or those who are mentally unbalanced. The author is greatly concerned with the recent increase in mass murders. The information in Table 2 was taken from a newspaper article entitled "Crime tops list of U. S. concerns; most think TV is direct factor" which appeared in *The Japan Times* on 20 December 1993. The events contained in this table all occurred within a 15-day period in December 1993.

Table 2 Mass murders which occurred in the U. S. between 2 December and 17 December, 1993.

DATE	PLACE	PERPETRATOR	VICTIM/S	REASON FOR ASSAULT	NUMBER INJURED	DEATH TOLL
2 Dec '93	Oxnard, Calif.	lone male age 33	police officer; 3 unemployment office workers	anger over fight for unemployment coverage; shot by police	4	5
7 Dec '93	New York City	lone male age ?	commuters on train	racial hatred (good family in Jamaica, but distressed by position of blacks in U. S. society)	18	5
14 Dec '93	Aurora, Colorado	lone male age 19	workers in a Chuck E. Cheese pizza parlor	fired from restaurant 4 months before	1	4
16 Dec '93	Boise, Idaho	lone male age 47	brother and another man in conference room; suicide	involved in mining-claim dispute	0	3
16 Dec '93	Chelsea, Michigan	lone male age 39 high school chemistry teacher	school superintendent, principal, & teacher	involved in union grievance	2	1
17 Dec '93	Hugo, Oklahoma	lone male age ?	shopping center patrons; suicide	unknown	?	3

(from Nishio, MR, "Software of the spirit -- current values education in Japan", *Journal of the Institute of International Sociology* (国際社会学研究所研究紀要), 2: 33-127, 1994.)

These types of violent incidents are not just an American problem, but have been occurring world wide. For example in June of 1994, a Swedish Army lieutenant used his army assault rifle to kill five women and two men (*The Japan Times*, 14 June 1994). In September of 1994, Tian Mingjian, 31, a first lieutenant in the People's Liberation Army stepped onto a six-lane highway in Beijing and started shooting at everyone in sight. He killed 14 people and wounded 80 others. Hong Kong newspapers reported that Tian's wife had died during an abortion forced on her by one of his superiors (*TIME*, 3 Oct 1994).

When viewed from the point of view of a psychologist, there are several themes which emerge when one considers these mass murders. Firstly, though little is known of the details of the lives of these assailants, what is known is that they all had significant stressors in their lives. The Oxnard, California man had been refused unemployment benefit compensation, the New York City subway gunman appeared to be in culture shock due to the discrepancy between the status of blacks in his home of Jamaica and the status of blacks in the U.S. The Aurora, Colorado male had been fired from his job while the Boise, Idaho and Chelsea, Michigan gunmen were involved in disputes. The Hugo, Oklahoma shopping center gunman was an unemployed ex-convict whose dog had been shot by a neighbor and though he reported the incident to the police, nothing seems to have been done about it. The Beijing gunman had supposedly lost his wife during an abortion ordered by his superior. All of these men were under significant stress in their lives, but stress is not new. Why are we seeing a dramatic increase in this type of crime?

It is felt that these cases fall into two categories, "disinhibited anger and aggression" and "dramatic suicides" and that both of these are related to the influence of the mass media. "Dramatic suicides" will be discussed later in the paper in connection with the mass media providing attention to negative behavior on a grand scale.

It is well known that some people under stress demonstrate heightened levels of anger and sometimes aggression. There may have been no conscious desire to die in these cases, but merely the inability to inhibit angry, aggressive impulses. It is the author's position that the mass media is providing many examples of this type of behavior. What do you do when things get stressful? There are few models of self-control — the response is generally verbal and/or physical aggression. A recent movie with Michael Douglas, "Coming Home", clearly demonstrates this phenomenon. In the movie, this mild mannered white-collar worker is divorced and is trying to get to his child's home to give her a birthday present. Along the way he gets caught in a traffic jam, he is attacked by hoods, and angered by the greed of a convenience store owner, he smashes the man's store with a baseball bat. As the movie progresses, he becomes increasingly disinhibited, killing a number of people.

Japan has a tradition of self control. Prewar morals texts tell the story of a young boy who was taunted by boys of lower status, but he did not respond. People thought that he was a coward, but they later found him to have great courage. His failure to fight had been due to control of his anger rather than due to cowardice. The mass

media both in Japan and the U. S. constantly provide us with models of LACK of self control — becoming aggressive when faced with difficulty, giving in to sexual desire, following our every ephemeral, corporal urge. It is no wonder that with multiple models provided to us by the mass media that there are not far more mass murders.

### **HOW VIEWING VIOLENCE ADVERSELY IMPACTS ON SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

There have been a number of theories which have been proposed to explain how viewing violence adversely affects social behavior (Atkinson et al 1987).

#### **a) MODELING AGGRESSIVE STYLES**

The first way is as described above - people imitate. Many cases of this type of imitative behavior have been presented above.

#### **b) BY INCREASING AROUSAL**

Osborn & Endsley (1971) measured SCRs (Skin Conductance Responses also known as Galvanic Skin Responses) and found that people become more emotionally aroused during violent TV programs than during nonviolent programs. This arousal may combine with other anger-induced arousal if the viewer is already frustrated or annoyed. Some support for this comes from research by White et al (1992) who investigated the relationship between the timing and outcomes of football games and the frequency of admissions to hospital emergency rooms. The frequency of admissions of female victims of gun shots, stabbings, assaults, falls, lacerations, and women struck by objects increased when the local football team won. Although the researchers interpreted their results as suggesting that viewing the successful use of violent acts may give the identifying fan a sense of license to dominate his surroundings, it can also be interpreted in terms of increased arousal. The increased level of arousal may prime the viewer to react more aggressively when frustrated or annoyed by someone in the home. The correct explanation for this phenomena of increased domestic violence following a televised football game is not yet clear, however, it is clear that the mass media is bringing this influence into the home and that this is correlated with an increase in domestic violence.

#### **c) DESENSITIZING PEOPLE TO VIOLENCE**

Researchers have found that young children are emotionally aroused by viewing violence, but with repeated exposure, their physiological reactions to displays of violence decrease. Thomas et al (1977) found that exposure to TV violence decreased emotional responsiveness to real life aggression in news films in both children and adults. It has been suggested that the emotional blunting produced by continual exposure to filmed violence may affect our ability to empathize with a victim's suffering in real life and thus decrease our readiness to help. Research by Linz et al (1988) adds further support to this interpretation. They found that males who viewed violent "slasher" films were less sympathetic to the victim and less empathetic toward

rape victims in general.

**d) REDUCING RESTRAINTS ON AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR**

Many people feel some anger or may feel like injuring someone who has provoked them, however, numerous years of social learning prevent us from doing so. There is research which indicates that observing other people behaving aggressively weakens our inhibitory social restraints (Doob & Wood 1972; Diener 1976)

**e) DISTORTING VIEWS ABOUT CONFLICT RESOLUTION**

Interpersonal conflicts as depicted in movies and on television are solved more often by physical aggression than by other means. From the perspective of young children who may have difficulty discriminating fiction and reality, watching "good guys" triumph through physical aggression over "bad guys" makes such behavior seem not only acceptable but perhaps morally justified.

**f) ROLE MODELS FOR THOSE IN DISTRESS**

Huesmann et al (1984) found that children having school or social problems or who identify more with violent characters are more likely to be affected by TV violence.

**2) PROVIDING "EDUCATIONAL" INFORMATION REGARDING CRIMINAL BEHAVIOR**

The mass media is informative. Unfortunately there is negative information included along with the positive. In seeking novelty to attract viewers, the mass media provides information which is antisocial and which is being imitated. Included may be information about how to rob a bank, how to kill someone (as in the case of Park Han-sang mentioned above), or how to commit suicide ("Thelma and Louise"). The research of Heller & Polsky (1976) demonstrate this effect well in regard to crime. These researchers interviewed 100 young male offenders and found that 22% report having tried criminal techniques seen on television. An additional 22% further relate that they have contemplated committing crimes seen on television. Hendrick (1977) surveyed 208 inmates at a Michigan prison and found that many prisoners *take notes* while watching crime shows and that 9 out of 10 stated that they had learned new tricks and had increased their criminal expertise by watching crime programs. In other words, in newspaper articles, TV broadcasts and programs, movies, etc. what is presented is not merely news or entertainment; antisocial techniques are also taught. Consider an article entitled "Man gets life for killing wife with blowfish, poison plants." (*The Japan Times*, 23 Sept 1994). The article describes the case of a Japanese man who was heavily in debt and who purchased 62 potted aconites from a plant shop as well as 600 blowfish (which contain the deadly poison tetrodotoxin). He extracted poison from these and then tricked his wife into taking a capsule of aconite (a very poisonous alkaloid derived from the roots and leaves of aconite plants) by telling her it was a health drug. His first, second, and third wives all died of heart attacks. This article has not only



reported, but has also provided information.

### 3) PROVIDING POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT TO NEGATIVE ACTS AND IGNORING POSITIVE BEHAVIORS

It is commonly recognized that in order to raise a child successfully, it is necessary to ignore or punish bad behavior and to reinforce good behavior. Unfortunately parents sometimes reinforce bad behavior by paying attention to it. This is particularly true when parents ignore a child and the only way the child can get attention is by misbehaving. Sadly, the mass media is reversing this process on a grand societal scale. In other words, the mass media is reinforcing the negative behaviors in society and ignoring the positive behaviors. For example, in June of 1993, a woman by the name of Lorena Bobbitt received national media coverage because she cut off her husband's penis after he returned home drunk and forced her to have sex. Both husband and wife were showcased in the media and received money for interviews. The woman received hundreds of letters from men wanting dates or marriage (*The Japan Times*, 5 Feb 1994). The husband, John Wayne Bobbitt, has subsequently profited from his ordeal. He now has an agent and has made promotional tours for the reputed purpose of raising money for his legal and medical bills. According to his agent, a Mr. Goulet, he receives many offers for dates during his promotional trips (*The Japan Times*, 1 Mar 1994). A picture recently appeared showing him with his fiancée at a Las Vegas casino where he was a surprise guest at a magic show in which he participated in a guillotine trick.

With the amount of attention, money, and notoriety showered on the Bobbitts, it is

Table 3 Copycat crimes possibly related to Lorena Bobbitt's castration of her husband.

PERPETRATOR	DEED	DATE	SOURCE
ORIGINAL INCIDENT			
Lorena Bobbitt, 24, manicurist Manassas, Va.	Cut off husband's penis with kitchen knife after he forced her to have sex against her will; she claimed that he was a selfish lover who never provided her with orgasms*.	23 June 93	<i>The Japan Times</i> 6 Aug 1993 * <i>The Japan Times</i> 13 Jan 1994
COPYCAT INCIDENTS			
Aurelia Macias, 35, Los Angeles	Alleged to have cut off her husband's testicles and parts of his penis with scissors as he lay in bed in a drunken slumber; attack followed party at which Mrs. Macias accused her husband of 17 years of paying too much attention to another woman.	20 Sept 93	<i>The Japan Times</i> 14 Jan 1994
Woman in Ankara, Turkey	Got her lover of two years drunk on four bottles of wine, tied him up with a pair of tights and a scarf, and lopped his penis off with a bread knife. She said that he regularly forced her to have "divergent" sex.	23 Jan 94	<i>The Japan Times</i> 3 Feb 1994
Heidi S., 51 Germany	In October 1992, she beat her lover unconscious after he badgered her for sex, sliced off his penis with a bread knife, and set fire to the house.	Oct 92	<i>The Japan Times</i> 4 Feb 1994 (reported resumption of her trial)
Sarah Louise Achayok, 36, Anchorage, Alaska	Angry at her boyfriend because she thought he had been unfaithful, she bite off his penis; She was charged with second degree assault with intent to injure "by means of a dangerous instrument"	24 Feb 94	<i>The Japan Times</i> 27 Feb 1994
Dianne Sladek, 49, Stockton, England	After receiving her husband's boxer shorts mailed to their house with a note from his alleged lover, she melted 5 candles and poured the wax over his genitals while he was asleep.	23 Mar 94 exact date unclear	<i>The Japan Times</i> 23 Mar 1994

no wonder that the following copycat crimes occurred following the Bobbitt's incident (Table 3).

What is the effect when people read articles such as "Mrs. Bobbitt is still inundated with mail" (*The Japan Times*, 8 Feb 1994) which describes her bags of mail which include flowery get-well cards, religious messages, and checks. What happens when they read that people send her chocolates, flowers, and money. Combine this effect with the effect of a legal system which found Lorena Bobbitt not guilty by reason of insanity of maliciously wounding her husband by cutting off his penis. The Virginia court ruled that years of abuse by her husband had driven her temporarily insane (*The Japan Times*, 4 Feb 1994). With powerful reinforcers like this, is it any wonder that the above incidents occurred. Assistant District Attorney Larry Longo told reporters outside the court that spousal abuse, whether true or not, was no defense. "If, in fact, we are to believe that every woman who was battered can cut off a person's testicles, without any recourse on the part of society at large, we are going to have an awful lot of men walking around without their privates."

Traditional American values have emphasized courage, honesty, sense of responsibility for actions, etc. However, the mass media reinforced the opposite values in a recent incident in Singapore. George Fay, an 18-year-old American teenager, initially pleaded guilty to spraying paint on cars in Singapore, but later retracted his story and claimed that the Singapore police had bullied him into a false confession. He eventually received 4 lashes (cut from 6 in response to appeals by U. S. President Bill Clinton) with a rattan cane. Fay became the focus of an international debate because of the caning, a routine form of punishment in Singapore which involves lashing the bare buttocks, breaks the skin, takes weeks to heal and usually leaves permanent scars. Many people in the U. S. felt the punishment was cruel and inhuman and the incident generated a great deal of debate. The issue for the present article, however, is the model for behavior that the news coverage communicated to the public. First the boy commits vandalism, confesses his crime, then lies, claiming that he was forced to confess. He then demonstrates cowardly behavior in the face of the punishment which all offenders receive in Singapore for that crime and had to be heavily sedated to bear the lashes. What is the message communicated to America's young people? What is communicated is that 'it is acceptable to commit vandalism, and if you get caught, you should lie even though the evidence is overwhelming, its acceptable to act like a coward in the face of your punishment and to take lots of drugs to ease the pain of your punishment, also it is all right to blame everybody else but yourself, and if you do all this, you will get lots of media attention, notoriety, and even perhaps profit financially.' After another American teenager who is said to have been involved in the same incident as Fay escaped caning, the following headline appeared - "U. S. pleased Singapore will not cane teen" (*The Japan Times*, 19 May 1994).

### **MASS MEDIA PROVIDES "ATTENTION" ON GRAND SCALE**

In connection with the theme of 'reinforcement of negative behavior' it is necessary

to consider the cases of mass murder mentioned earlier. Psychiatrists and psychologists have long interpreted suicide as aggression turned inward, but one of the things we may be seeing in these mass shootings is the phenomenon of "aggressive suicide." That is, the person decides to die, but decides to make a "dramatic exit." This is particularly clear in the case of Frank Corder, 41, who crashed a small plane into the White House lawn in September 1994. He had separated from his wife of ten years three weeks previously, his father had recently died of cancer, and he had problems with drugs and alcohol. His relatives say that it was not his politics but a determination to end his life that motivated him to steal a plane and fly it to Washington. His brother said he may have been trying to emulate the young German pilot who landed a small plane in Red Square on 28 May 1987. Frank Corder's brother stated that "One time he mentioned about the guy that landed in Red Square and how that guy made a big thing for himself and everything landing in Red Square, and the Kremlin." The *Washington Post* quoted his brother as having told him "If I'm going to check out [end my life], that's the way I'm going to do it. I'm going to crash a plane into the White House" (*The Japan Times*, 14 Sept 1994). This type of behavior is in many ways similar to the small child who cannot obtain the attention or praise of his parents by being good, so he misbehaves and suddenly he receives a great deal of attention, and though it is negative attention, it is better than no attention at all. In the dramatic final moments of the lives of these men, people finally pay attention if only for a brief moment. This same type of motive — "dramatic aggressive suicide" is also evident in the "Thelma and Louise" copycat case which occurred in Texas described previously.

#### **4) MASS MEDIA EDITING OF STORIES FOR ENTERTAINMENT VALUE WITH NO THOUGHT OF THE IMPACT ON SOCIETY — FURTHER POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OF NEGATIVE BEHAVIOR**

The American press is particularly guilty of this. They are quick to pick up news stories and make sure that all citizens learn "the facts" with no editing with regard to the impact which that news story might have on society. Their argument is that the people "have the right to know." This often interacts adversely with the American legal system as in the case of O. J. Simpson. There is the issue of pleading "not guilty" when evidence is strongly incriminating and the message which is being sent to young people. But perhaps more destructive is this headline "Death penalty won't be sought against Simpson" (*The Japan Times*, 11 Sept 1994). The message that the legal system and the mass media are sending to citizens is that 'if you are rich, famous, black, and handsome, even though you viciously kill two people, you will not receive the death sentence that someone poor, unknown, and black or white would.' In other words, if you have money and fame, different rules apply. The other message is that 'even if the evidence is clear you should lie, lie, lie.'

Another example of the negative interaction of mass media and the U. S. legal system involves the following. On December 1993, a robber-thug beat up an old man in the New York subway. When the robber tried to run, a policeman shot and wounded

him. The thug sued and was able to collect \$ 2 million for his pain and suffering while the old man who got pummeled did not even recover the cost of the repair of his glasses (*The Japan Times*, 31 Dec 1993). The message to those who hear this news story is that 'it is all right to rob and attack someone and you might even be lucky enough to get shot in which case you can collect several million dollars if you sue.' With this type of positive reinforcement of negative behavior, is it any wonder crime is increasing? The same article reports the case of Ernie Mota, an illegal alien with a history of drug dealing and other crimes, who was arrested for drunk driving and was found to be in possession of a bag of cocaine. He tried to swallow the cocaine so that it could not be used as evidence against him. Even though the policemen struggled to stop him, he managed to swallow it all. He was then put in a cell and had a reaction to the drug which he voluntarily swallowed. The medics were called and they barely saved his life, but his vision is impaired and his brain has been damaged. Ernie went to federal court and sued the city of Oak Forest for \$ 7 million dollars claiming that the cops did not obtain medical attention for him fast enough. The attorneys for the city described the suit as "absurd," but as the columnist noted, a suit is not absurd until the jury says so (*The Japan Times*, 31 Dec 1993). Consider the effects of this type of news article on society as a whole. Will crime or lawsuits decrease because of this type of story?

Contrast the impact on crime in society of the two previous news items with the following news article. *The Japan Times* carried an article on 12 September 1994 entitled "Iraqi television displays amputated hand of convict." Described in this article is the case of a thief who had his right hand cut off and forehead branded with a black triangle for stealing his cousin's television and about ¥80,000 (\$800). It seems that Saddam Hussein's government has announced a program of cutting off the ears of military deserters and draft dodgers. Robbers and car thieves will lose their right hand for their first offense, their leg for a second offense, and those who commit armed robbery or kill their victims will face the death penalty. The narrator of the TV program noted that this was an "example to those who allow themselves to trespass on the rights of others." Although the author does not condone this type of extreme punishment, the reader is encouraged to consider the effect articles or broadcasts of this type in the mass media have on the crime rate of that country.

## **5) DISTORTION OF SOCIAL ATTITUDES**

There is significant data to show the substantial influence which the mass media manifests on social attitudes. Presented here are but a few of the areas which have been investigated.

### **DRINKING**

Atkin (1990) reviewed the research which has looked at the effects of TV drinking portrayals on adolescent audiences. His review found that alcohol commercials contribute to an increase in overall consumption by teenagers and may have an impact on alcohol misuse and drunk driving.

## **ETHNIC GROUPS**

Winkel's (1990) research provides evidence that ethnic references in crime reporting result in collective damage to ethnic groups.

## **FANTASY STYLES**

Quite apart from direct effects on behavior, researchers have found that television influences children's fantasy styles (Valkenburg et al 1992). They found that violent television programs encouraged the children's aggressive-hercic fantasy style.

## **MENTALLY ILL**

Results from research by Wahl & Lefkowitz (1989) support concerns that media depictions add to mental illness stigma and suggest that corrective information alone may not be sufficient to counteract the stigmatizing impact.

## **RAPE MYTH**

Brinson (1992) investigated the issue of rape myths in prime-time TV dramas during the 1980's. The investigator found numerous accusations in the story line that the victim "asked" for the rape or "wanted it". She concluded that the overuse of rape myths in these television programs reinforced the belief that women are responsible for the rape, not men.

## **GENERAL**

In an interesting article entitled "Myths and heroes: Visions of the future" (Whitaker 1989), Leighton Whitaker of the Swarthmore College Psychological Services argues that increases in recent decades of youth suicide, homicide, drug use, eating disorders, and passive kinds of learning are related to media inducements to violence and drug use, especially as conveyed by TV and movies. She suggests that in helping students, it is necessary to help them see through and to refute the "schizophrenic-like" commercial equations of good looks, strength, and popularity with the false heroes who sell violence and drugs, including alcohol and cigarettes.

## **6) PROLONGED MASS MEDIA VIEWING CONTRIBUTES TO SOCIAL ISOLATION**

Robert D. Putman in an essay entitled "Bowling Alone" has provided new evidence which indicates that the powerful introduction of television in the 1950's has been a major factor in the subsequent decline in both social trust and group participation in the U. S. He has documented a sharp decline over the past generation in the percentage of people joining groups of all kinds, political, choral, fraternal, church, hobby. Even those who bowl now tend to bowl alone instead of joining leagues. This decline has been accompanied by "a sharp decline in Americans' readiness to trust one another, to assume that strangers, associates and even friends have beneficent motives, not hostile intentions." At every educational level, Putnam found a negative correlation between

Table 4 Hours of television viewing correlated with number of groups joined among the well educated.

	1 hours or less per day	2 hours per day	3 to 4 hours per day	5 hours or more per day
NUMBER OF GROUPS JOINED	2.7	2.5	2.3	1.9

the number of hours an individual watches television and both the number of groups the individual joins and the level of social trust (Table 4) (*The Japan Times*, 6 Sept 1995). This trend toward greater social isolation is particularly disturbing given the wealth of research which has demonstrated how powerful a factor social support is in helping individuals maintain mental stability. Contact with people who provide encouragement and advice is steadily decreasing. One can only guess at the effect this will have on mental health.

In this connection, it should be noted that not only the mass media, but the proliferation of technology is contributing to greater social isolation. It is contributing not only to greater social isolation, but also to the flight of the elite from urban environments. A recent article in "Hemispheres" (the in-flight magazine of United Airlines) entitled "A Good Working Environment" tells how, due to communication technology, more and more "location-flexible" entrepreneurs and professionals are being drawn by "a scenic environment, good climate, and public safety" and are moving to scenic, slow-paced resort communities. As the article points out, "what happens to the rest of society when some of its best minds, not to mention most affluent and technologically proficient individuals and companies, take off for their own personal Valhallas, leaving almost everyone else to worry about the crime, overcrowded public schools, and stagnant job growth that now affect many cities and suburbs?"

Probably an extreme example of television's negative impact on interpersonal communication is represented by the case of Margaret Armstrong, 64, who stabbed her sixty-year-old husband with a butcher knife when he wouldn't stop talking when she was watching TV (*The Japan Times*, 18 Dec 1993).

## 7) DECREASE IN SOCIALLY POSITIVE BEHAVIOR DUE TO REPORTING OF ADVERSE INCIDENTS

One of the most fundamental Christian teachings is to help those in need. There have been recent incidents reported of people injured or killed when they tried to come to the aid of strangers. On 31 December 1994, Christopher West and two friends stopped to help a man after a car wreck. When they took him home, the man's frightened 13-year-old son shot West dead as he and his friends tried to help the boy's father get into the locked home (*The Japan Times*, 4 Jan 1995).

Another story entitled "Just nosing around looking for trouble" tells the story of a 30-year-old man who tried to break up a fight between a taxi driver and two passengers who did not pay a fare and had one of the passengers bite off a huge portion of

his nose (*The Japan Times*, 12 Dec 1993).

What can one suppose was the effect of the reporting of an incident where an off-duty rescue worker contracted AIDS when he tried to help an accident victim who was infected? Although the author knows of no published studies, one can readily guess that there was a decline in "good Samaritan" behavior following the publication of these incidents. In these cases which is more important: impact on society as a whole or the idea that the public has the right to have all information?

Beyond comprehension is the recent incident in Detroit (*The Japan Times*, 24 Aug 1995) in which Doletha Word, the mother of a 13-year-old daughter, angered a 19-year-old man in a traffic accident. The man then allegedly smashed the windows of her car with a jack stand, dragged her out of her car, then beat her with his fists, and chased her until she jumped to her death from a bridge. Her body was found downstream, missing a leg which is believed to have been severed by a boat propeller. None of the people who witnessed the incident came to her aid.

It is a telling commentary on American society when the following type of story becomes news. An article entitled "N.Y. woman is surprised by kind act" (*The Japan Times*, 6 Feb 1994) described how an absent minded woman left her bank card and \$100 which she had just withdrawn in the machine and walked away. A man came running after her to return what she had forgotten. Perhaps more stories of "random acts of kindness" and fewer stories of good Samaritans badly injured or killed would go a long way towards increasing good deeds toward strangers. The mass media has powerful reinforcing potential; it should attempt to reinforce more of the good by paying attention to it, and avoid reporting those stories which will lead to a decrease of positive social behavior.

#### **8) PROLIFERATION OF THE USE OF THE NEGATIVES OF HUMAN NATURE TO ATTRACT AUDIENCE ATTENTION: ATTENTION TO EMOTION/PAIN AROUSING EVENTS & HABITUATION**

There is an unfortunate interaction which is occurring between the mass media and human nature. At the basis of this problem is a basic phenomenon in psychology known as habituation (慣れ). Humans (and animals) will automatically attend to a novel stimulus, but if this stimulus is presented a number of times, they will cease to respond to it. In everyday language, they become bored. Attention will not be paid again unless a new and different stimulus is presented. This tendency to attend to novel stimuli appears to be a "hard-wired" response in the brain which is meant to insure our survival. A new sound or person may signify danger, and we must attend to it in order to consciously determine it's nature.

This automatic survival response of attention to emotional situations and habituation are currently interacting with the mass media in a very negative way. The mass media, whether movies, television, or videos, must continuously overcome this "hard-wired" response of habituation. There is great competition between the various producers to increase the size of the audience, but, because of habituation, the media

must continue to provide novel stimulation. Unfortunately, they are accomplishing this by increasingly utilizing the negatives of human nature — sex, greed, murder, betrayal, etc. They also rely on extremes of emotion — a method which is guaranteed to attract attention. An acquaintance tells the story of watching a cow moan in pain and seeing all the other cows gather around to see what was the matter. The morbid fascination of humans with disasters and emotionally or physically distressing situations is well known. In both animals and humans, this has survival value. If we can find out what caused the accident or pain, how the rape or murder occurred, how the person died of poison, then we can avoid the same type of thing in the future. In other words, events resulting in emotional or physical pain are automatically attended to in order to learn from them. The media is thus profiting from a basic human survival instinct, the need to learn the source of suffering in order to avoid it. At the same time, the mass media finds it necessary to continuously vary the content of programs to avoid habituation (boredom) of the audience. To do this, they are increasingly using the negative aspects of human interaction — discord, marital problems, rebellion, sexual problems, crime, cheating, etc. Sadly, as mentioned previously, they are not just providing entertainment, but models of behavior which are being imitated.

Another unfortunate consequence of this interaction of habituation and the commercial mass media is the desensitization to violence discussed earlier (Griffiths 1989). We are adapting to and tolerating higher and higher levels of violence and aggression.

### **9) MASS MEDIA PORTRAYED LIFE STYLES CONTRIBUTE TO FEELINGS OF RELATIVE DEPRIVATION & FRUSTRATION**

The mass media can also contribute to feelings of relative deprivation and frustration in the viewer. Hennigan and her colleagues (1982) used state-wide and city-wide data and found that the introduction of commercial television was associated with increases in selective property crime. In other words, feelings of dissatisfaction arise when one sees what others have which one does not have. In the years before the mass media, we may have had greater levels of satisfaction because we knew nothing of other life styles. Currently through the mass media, people see what others have which they themselves do not have and this causes some people to resort to criminal behavior to obtain the same things.

### **10) VALUES PURVEYED BY THE MASS MEDIA CONTRARY TO TRADITIONAL CULTURAL VALUES**

The majority of research on the impact of the mass media has focused on its influence on violence. This focus is extremely narrow. The mass media's influence is considerably broader. As Gunter (1988) has stated "TV's real power to shape public outlook lies in its symbolic representation of sociocultural norms and values; these are arguably described as distorted or stereotyped aspects of reality." Also, as Heath et al (1989) have pointed out, viewing the content of many television shows can distort children's perceptions of the world and "the complex nature of this association makes



Table 5 Social behavior — traditional values versus mass medial values.

BEHAVIORAL QUESTION	TRADITIONAL JAPANESE VALUE	MASS MEDIA VALUE
How do we respond when angry or stressed?	self restraint	aggression
How do we treat other people?	“Omoiyari” (think of other's feelings) Kindness Help for those in need	Impolite, ignore other's feelings Pursuit of own goals Ignore person in need as may be trick or put rescuer in danger
Who is important in society?	doctors teachers	talents baseball players actors singers
Is work or play more important?	work balanced work & play	play
Do we take responsibility for our actions?	Yes, take responsibility for our own actions	Blame others for our troubles
Should we tell the truth?	Yes, honesty	Lie to others

intervention difficult.”

A detailed consideration of the values currently being purveyed by the mass media cannot be undertaken in the current paper. We have considered some of the more dramatic models of behavior such as “dramatic, aggressive suicide” or murderous aggression when under great pressure. We have also considered the cases of deaths resulting when children model the behavior which they have seen on videos or television.

There are many examples of values purveyed by the mass media replacing the values which societies have traditionally taught. Consider Japan's group orientation in light of research investigating arcade video games which found that most of these games allowed for sequential competition, but that none allowed for cooperation and that many games contained antisocial values of a violent nature (Braun & Giroux 1989). Table 5 poses a question and then provides the value (or values) which apply to that situation which has (have) traditionally been taught in Japan. In the third column are listed those values which the profit-oriented mass media studios are purveying. Consider the direction in which Japan is heading if these mass media generated values replace the traditional values of society.

#### **11) PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS OF PROLONGED MASS MEDIA VIEWING: DEPRESSION, OBESITY, POOR PHYSICAL CONDITION, POOR EYESIGHT, ETC.**

There are other more concrete negative effects of the mass media whether this be TV computer games (“FAMICOM”), television, or videos. Psychologists are well aware that exercise, particularly aerobic exercise, increases mood and contributes to better mental functioning and a greater sense of well being. Unfortunately, free time is increasingly being spent in front of the television screen.

At a presentation to the American Psychiatric Association in May of 1994, Dr. Paul Kettl, associate professor of psychiatry at Penn State University's Milton Hershey Center, stated that there is a "dramatically high" connection between the rise of television and a rise in depression which has occurred among American young people since World War II. He attributed this rise in depression to the viewing "of thousands of hours of repetitive acts of senseless violence" and to the fact that long hours of television viewing may further distance children from social contacts with peers and family leading to an increased risk of major depression (*The Japan Times*, 25 May 1994).

The increased sedentary existence which results from long hours of inactive viewing has combined with an increase in consumption of junk food (heavily advertised on television) and this is resulting in greater obesity among the young. Research done at the University of California, San Diego found that 47% of commercials studied related to food and that 91% of the foods advertised promoted nutritionally unsound products. They concluded that TV contributes to obesity not only through a sedentary lifestyle, but also perhaps in influencing selection of foods loaded with fat, sugar and salt (*The Japan Times*, 28 June 1995). Poor health and poor eye sight have also been linked to excessive television viewing.

Research has shown that children are spending more and more time watching TV and other media rather than playing with others. Play in both young humans and animals is a time to practice skills which will benefit them in adult life. The question arises as to how many of the "skills" picked up from endless television will contribute in a positive way to the future of the child.

## **12) CONTRIBUTION TO DECLINE IN READING SKILLS**

Space does not allow a detailed consideration of the issue but a number of research studies have found a negative impact of the mass media on academic skills. On 29 May 1992, *The Japan Times* carried an article entitled "Bush 'troubled' by gov't study linking children's reading and TV-viewing habits."

## **DISCUSSION**

The mass media has great power to bring us information and shape our thinking. If those controlling the mass media have the best interests of the society as a whole in mind, it's influence is potentially extremely positive. However, if those in control focus only on profit with no consideration of the impact of the content which they choose, then the societies of the world are headed rapidly downhill. We already have a taste of the future. On 16 October 1991, 23 people were killed by George Henard, 35, when he drove his pickup truck into a Texas cafeteria and began shooting. In his home was a *videotape* of a shooting spree which occurred in July of 1984 at a McDonald's in San Ysidro, California. In this incident, a man by the name of James Huberty entered the restaurant in combat fatigues and killed 21 people before being killed by police (*The Japan Times*, 12 Aug 1993).

The link between the mass media and an increase in societal violence appears to be strong. But it must be emphasized that this is only one of the influences. The media is a powerful vehicle for affecting all aspects of human behavior. It is not only reducing the amount of time humans interact with each other, but it is presenting a distorted picture of how we should interact. We need to take a cold, hard look at the patterns of behavior which television is purveying. Is it encouraging us to work out problems between spouses or is it encouraging us to find different partners when things get rough? Is it promoting strong healthy friendships between boys and girls, or is it selling a myth of "romantic love?" Is it teaching us that people are more important than possessions, or is it telling us that if only we have such and such a car or a certain type of jewelry, or lots of money that we will be happy? There are multiple messages that the mass media are purveying which are nonviolent, but may prove to be equally as devastating for the societies of the world.

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