

## Media Violence

*Do children have too much access to violent content?*

**R**ecent accounts of mass school shootings and other violence have intensified the debate about whether pervasive violence in movies, television and video games negatively influences young people's behavior. Over the past century, the question has led the entertainment media to voluntarily create viewing guidelines and launch public awareness campaigns to help parents and other consumers make appropriate choices. But lawmakers' attempts to restrict or ban content have been unsuccessful because courts repeatedly have upheld the industry's right to free speech. In the wake of a 2011 Supreme Court ruling that said a direct causal link between media violence — particularly video games — and real violence has not been proved, the Obama administration has called for more research into the question. Media and video game executives say the cause of mass shootings is multifaceted and cannot be blamed on the entertainment industry, but many researchers and lawmakers say the industry should shoulder some responsibility.



*The ultraviolent video game "Grand Theft Auto V" grossed more than \$1 billion in its first three days on the market. Young players know it's fantasy, some experts say, but others warn the game can negatively influence youths' behavior.*

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# Media Violence

BY CHRISTINA L. LYONS

## THE ISSUES

Teenage girls flooded movie theaters last fall to watch the PG-13-rated “Hunger Games: Catching Fire,” the second in a series based on a tale of kids killing kids.

“It’s a heady and disturbing concept,” one reviewer said of the theme. “As executed here, it’s often a bloody and gruesome one, as well.”

But another movie critic wrote: “Keenly aware of his adolescent audience, the director always manages to look away before the violence becomes too icky.” The critic commended screenwriters for toning down the graphic violence of Suzanne Collins’ series, which two years before had appeared on the American Library Association’s list of the 10 most “challenged” books — those that parents or others most frequently sought to have pulled from library shelves.<sup>1</sup>

A month earlier, Syracuse University administrators came under fire for inviting Florida rapper Ace Hood to perform during the school’s annual Orange Madness event launching the basketball season. Local parents who typically take their children to the community celebration were hesitant because Hood’s lyrics include such lines as, “Know I keep that .45, turn you into Cabbage Patch/Hit you right between the eyes and leave you like an alley rat.”<sup>2</sup>

In November, gamers rushed to buy “Grand Theft Auto V,” the latest edition of a popular video game about three violent criminals who commit burglaries and corporate crimes, gun



Getty Images/John Moore

*Nelba Márquez-Greene and Jimmy Greene embrace on the one-month anniversary of the death of their 6-year-old daughter, Ana Grace, who was among 20 children and six teachers killed by Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., on Dec. 14, 2012. Because Lanza, 20, and other high-profile school shooters reportedly have been fans of violent video games, such incidents have reignited a perennial debate about whether violence in the media can cause aggressive behavior.*

down police officers and drive over civilians. Using their mobile devices, enthusiasts can play from anywhere — “at the bar, on the beach, on the toilet,” one ad said. “This is the future, we’re almost sure of it.”<sup>3</sup>

Rapid technological advances allow today’s consumers, including children, to easily access — anywhere, anytime — media content that some critics say depicts unprecedented levels of blood and gore and moral depravity. Mass shootings such as the 2012 Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Conn., repeatedly have prompted

lawmakers, parents, researchers and educators to question whether such content contributes to aggressive behavior among youths and whether the entertainment industry’s self-regulation is sufficient to protect young consumers from the effects of media violence. Moreover, as shown by reviews of “Hunger Games,” many observers have differing opinions on the acceptable level of violence in young viewers’ entertainment.

Researchers disagree on whether media violence can lead young people to mimic violent behavior, a lack of consensus that industry officials have cited in defending their entertainment products. “There’s no medical or scientific research showing that video games cause people to be violent in real life — even our most ardent critics agree with that,” Dan Hewitt, vice president of media relations and event management for the Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which represents video game producers, said in an e-mail.

But some researchers contend that studies have long shown that exposure to media violence at least correlates with aggressive behavior. “Right now, the research is so overwhelmingly consistent that there are negative effects on the tendency to behave violently — [causing] desensitization and lowering of empathy — [that] it’s a shame we are still fighting this battle,” says Joanne Cantor, a professor emeritus of communications and outreach director for the Center for Communication Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

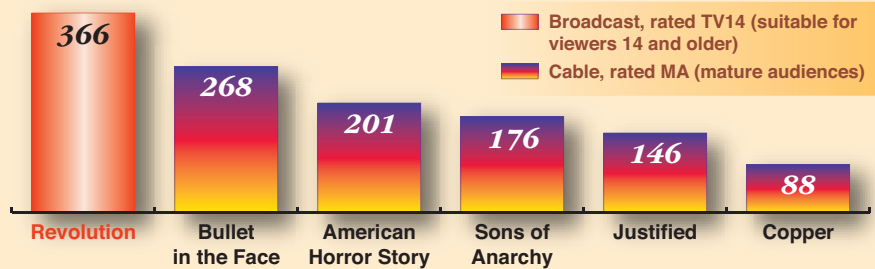
Concerns about media violence are hardly new. In the 1930s children



## TV Rating System Called Inconsistent

Television broadcast programs have long been considered less violent than cable shows. But a recent report found that some broadcast programs are more violent than cable shows and that the TV ratings system does not consistently warn of explicit adult content. For example, NBC's "Revolution," a post-apocalyptic drama rated as appropriate for viewers 14 and older, contained more violence than any of the cable shows studied that were aimed at mature audiences, defined as viewers over 17.

**Total Acts of Violence on "Revolution" (TV-14)  
vs. Adult-Rated Cable Shows**  
(during four hours of programming, 2012-13 season)



Source: "An Examination of Violence, Graphic Violence and Gun Violence in the Media (2012-2013)," Parents Television Council, December 2013, [http://w2.parentstv.org/main/Research/Studies/CableViolence/vstudy\\_dec2013.pdf](http://w2.parentstv.org/main/Research/Studies/CableViolence/vstudy_dec2013.pdf)

watched movies, listened to radio thrillers and read comic books — all of which sparked alarms among community leaders worried about rising juvenile crime rates. By the 1980s, studies increasingly examined television dramas and musical lyrics for violent content, while story creators and some psychologists defended such entertainment for helping children overcome fears.

Besides watching television, today's children use computers, tablets and smartphones to access movies, books, the Internet, video games and music — at any time. Children ages 8 to 18 consume, on average, 10 hours and 45 minutes per day when the simultaneous use of multiple devices is taken into account. By contrast, in the 1930s, children were exposed to 10 hours of media per week.<sup>4</sup> (See graph, p. 149.)

The Parents Television Council (PTC), which monitors prime-time

television shows and PG- and G-rated movies for violent content, said that because of the ubiquity of portable media devices a great deal of children's television consumption today occurs "outside the watchful eye of a parent." In a special report released in December, the organization complained that the increasingly graphic nature of today's TV violence is "as alarming as the volume of violence." The report cited examples such as child molestation, rape, mutilation, disfigurement, dismemberment, graphic killings or injuries by gunfire and stabbings, cannibalism and burning flesh. And the most graphic violence airs when children were more likely to be watching, said the report.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, the report said, parents can no longer assume that broadcast shows are less violent than cable shows or rely on TV ratings to warn of explicit adult content. For example, the

study found that NBC's broadcast show "Revolution," which is rated TV-14 (appropriate for viewers 14 and older) contained more violence than all of the cable shows studied that were rated for "mature adults."

"Cable is probably pushing the envelope . . . and [violence is] moving into the regular broadcast," says Dan Romer, director of the Adolescent Communication Institute at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. "I think there is more violence on broadcast TV as a result of cable."

Studies do not indicate how much of children's overall media consumption entails violent content, although some researchers say the number of violent actions in modern bestselling adolescent novels has risen significantly since the advent of the "young adult novel" in the 1960s. Others say violence has been a central component of children's books since the first fairy tales were published.<sup>6</sup>

A study in November showed that violent content in PG-13 movies more than doubled between 1950 and 2010, and the level of gun violence exceeds that in R-rated films (as determined by "coders" who counted violent sequences in 945 top-grossing films). But Joan Graves, senior vice president and chairman of the Classification and Rating Administration at the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), questions what actions the coders are identifying as violent. The unrealistic "superhero" actions depicted in most of the PG-13 movies studied are not the same as the graphic violence depicted in R-rated movies, she says. "We're not comparing apples to apples here," she says.<sup>7</sup>

Many parents, lawmakers and experts worry that violent video games, such as "Call of Duty," "Killzone 3" and "Battlefield 3," may be more dangerous because of their interactive nature and because they reward players for shooting people onscreen or they de-

pict sexual violence. “The thing I find incredibly personally upsetting is the amount of violence against women in these games . . . and a lot of the roles are prostitutes and rape victims. It’s staggering,” says April McClain-Delaney, Washington director of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that provides information for educators and parents about media content.

“Research on the background of our juvenile mass murderers [shows] they have one thing in common: They all dropped out of life and filled their lives with nothing but violent movies and violent video games,” said Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, author of *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. “The sickest video games and the sickest movies are very, very sick indeed. And the sick, sick kids who immerse themselves in this ‘entertainment’ are very sick indeed.” The Sandy Hook massacre, in which 20-year-old Adam Lanza shot and killed 20 elementary school students and six adults, had been “building for years,” he added, “and there is much, much worse yet to come.”<sup>8</sup>

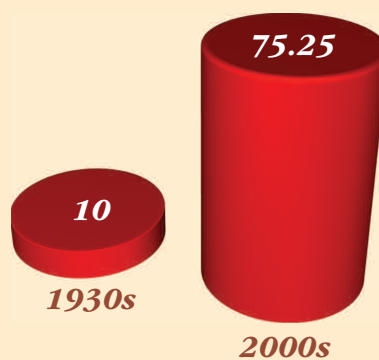
Lanza reportedly had an appetite for violent video games, as did the two Columbine High School seniors who massacred 13 classmates and teachers in 1999, and Anders Breivik, who killed 77 people in Norway in 2011.<sup>9</sup>

When the National Rifle Association found itself a target of legislators after the Sandy Hook shootings, it too blamed the producers of violent video games and music videos. “There exists in this country, sadly, a callous, corrupt and corrupting shadow industry that sells . . . violence against its own people,” NRA CEO and Executive Vice President Wayne LaPierre said. Several members of Congress also wanted to take a closer look at the media — among them, West Virginia Democratic Sens. John “Jay” Rockefeller and Joe Manchin and Republicans Sen. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, Tennessee Rep. Marsha Blackburn, and others.<sup>10</sup>

## Youths’ Weekly Media Use Soars

*In the 1930s children and teens spent about 10 hours per week using popular media, such as radio, movies, magazines and records. Today, children ages 8 to 18 spend about 75 hours weekly using media devices, including television, computers, tablets, game consoles, MP3 players and smart phones.*

### Weekly Media Exposure of Youths Ages 8 to 18



Source: Aviva Lucas Gutnick, et al., “Always connected: the new digital media habits of young children,” *The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop*, 2010, [www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/jgcc\\_alwaysconnected.pdf](http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/jgcc_alwaysconnected.pdf)

The investigation of the shootings revealed that Lanza had played violent video and online games such as “Combat Arms” and “World of Warcraft.” He also incessantly played the nonviolent game “Dance Dance Revolution,” had a history of mental illness, access to firearms and a fascination with mass murder. A federal investigation of a series of school shootings that occurred between 1974 and 2000 found that 87 percent of the shooters were interested in violent movies, 12 percent in violent video

games and 24 percent in violent books, but there was no common type of interest in media violence.<sup>11</sup>

President Obama and several states have called for further study into the risk factors of readily available firearms, violent video games and media images and lack of mental health care. But when addressing media laws, the courts routinely reject regulations that infringe on free speech rights, so lawmakers and parent advocacy groups see limited options beyond calling for more research, encouraging more parental oversight of children’s media consumption and considering new labeling or ratings systems.<sup>12</sup>

The Supreme Court in 2011 struck down a 2005 California law that would have barred minors from buying or renting violent video games that give the player options for “killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being,” if those actions are created to appeal to “a deviant or morbid interest.” The court said the law violated the First Amendment’s protection of free speech and that studies had not proved that exposure to violent video games causes children to act aggressively.

“Video games qualify for First Amendment protection,” Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in the court’s decision. “This country has no tradition of specially restricting children’s access to depictions of violence.”<sup>13</sup>

As researchers, advocacy groups, lawmakers, industry leaders and parents continue to debate the issue, here are key questions being debated:

### **Does media violence cause aggressive behavior?**

“I think media violence is part of the mix that’s producing a mean world,” says John Murray, a research fellow in psychology at Washington College in Chestertown, Md., and visiting scientist at the Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital in Boston.

Murray, who also is emeritus professor of developmental psychology at Kansas State University, helped coordinate research for a 1972 surgeon general's report that he says concluded children who regularly viewed violence on television demonstrated aggressive behavior. He also cites a 1982 National Institute of Mental Health conclusion that "television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable that has been measured. That should have ended this constant bickering" on this question, he says.<sup>14</sup>

In a more recent study, Murray and colleagues used magnetic resonance imaging (MRIs) to determine that the brain-activation patterns of children who viewed boxing scenes from "Rocky IV" suggested they were storing the images in a part of the brain that could potentially allow them to instantly recall the images when deciding how to respond to threatening situations.<sup>15</sup>

In a study published in 2012 in the *British Journal of Social Psychology*, people who read stories about "physical aggression," for example, were then more physically aggressive.<sup>16</sup> And various studies on the impact of violent and misogynistic lyrics in rap music found that they could desensitize listeners to sexual harassment and domestic violence and lead to aggressive responses to certain scenarios.<sup>17</sup>

Researchers increasingly are focusing on interactive video games. "We know that video game violence is correlated with violence — just like smoking is correlated with lung cancer," Brad J. Bushmann, co-chair of a National Science Foundation committee studying media violence research, told a House panel in March 2013.<sup>18</sup>

Bushman, an Ohio State University communication and psychology professor, helped lead a 2012 study that found that participants who played a violent video game 20 minutes per day for three days displayed increased aggressive behavior. That matched his

analysis of hundreds of earlier studies concluding such games increased aggressive thoughts and behavior while decreasing empathy among males and females of all ages. The International Society for Research on Aggression also concluded that exposure to all types of media violence has negative effects, regardless of "age, gender, or where the person lives in the world."<sup>19</sup>

"The link with aggression has been proven," says Victor Strasburger, a professor of pediatrics and family and community medicine at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. The correlation between aggression and video games is as conclusive as it is for violent TV programming, he says, and some studies suggest interactive games are more influential.<sup>20</sup>

Bushman is a bit more circumspect. "We haven't 'proven' that violent video games directly cause violence because it can't be proven," he says. "There is no way to ethically run experiments that see if playing a violent game . . . can push a person into violence. But that doesn't mean we are left without evidence."

At the other end of the spectrum, Jonathan Freedman, emeritus psychology professor at the University of Toronto, says, "Those who believe in the harmful effects of media violence . . . have enormously overstated their findings, ignored negative findings that don't agree with them, and to some extent . . . they pick and choose what they report." Freedman argues in a 2002 book that fewer than half of existing studies at the time showed a causal connection between media violence and actual crime. The MPAA helped finance the book, he says, but had no say in its conclusions.<sup>21</sup>

"What we're doing isn't really science anymore," says Stetson University psychology professor Christopher Ferguson. "It may be well-intentioned advocacy, but it's no longer science. The core of science is skepticism." Ferguson helped coordinate a study in which pairs of college students (most

of them Hispanic) played an Xbox 360 game for 45 minutes — either the shooter game "Borderlands," "Lego Star Wars III," which is a cartoon but involves shooting, or the nonviolent "Portal II." Results showed video games did not influence aggressive behavior or perceptions of empathy, but cooperative play correlated with less aggressive behavior.<sup>22</sup>

Ferguson also "didn't find much," he says, when he studied teenagers who read books banned for "edgy" violent, sexual or occult content. "There was no correlation with aggression," although some correlation with mental health problems was reported primarily within a small group of girls. Reading for pleasure was associated with civic engagement and higher grades, he says.<sup>23</sup>

Free-speech advocates say the Supreme Court closed the debate in 2011 when it overturned California's video game sales law and said research had not proved a causal link between violent video games and violent behavior. The advocates also point out that even though violent video games are played globally, few other countries match the United States in the rate of homicides.<sup>24</sup>

"Our position is supported by common sense," the Entertainment Software Association's Hewitt wrote in an e-mail. "The video games played in this country are played worldwide, and ours is the only country that sees our society's level of violence."

### ***Are there benefits from media violence?***

Cantor, of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, says, "There is an innate sense that violence is important in any organism." In nature, she says, if organisms don't "pay attention to violence, they would be dead pretty soon."

Some researchers suggest that males' innate attraction to violent scenes represents a desire to learn about war, to see justice done or for social entertainment. Moreover, some experts say

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such exposure can prepare children for real-world events and help them address their fears.

Cartoon creator Gerard Jones said all forms of media provide a safe fantasy world where children can deal with their emotions and understand violence and sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

Violence has been a central theme of children's books from *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (1812) to today's young-adult fiction, literature experts say. Lauren Myracle, author of several young adult novels on the American Library Association's list of widely challenged books, defends her books, which content critics say contain too much sex or violence. She said she addresses a range of topics teens are grappling with, including "bullying, suicide, homophobia and social injustice," among other things.<sup>26</sup> And racial violence has long been a theme of rap music, which some researchers say fosters solidarity among black youths and serves as an artistic outlet.

Other researchers theorize that violent video games challenge the brain, allow participants to face their fears, act out aggression in a fantasy world and — in the case of multiplayer games — encourage social behavior. However, few studies have proved such theories.

Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olson, cofounders of the Harvard Medical School Center for Mental Health and Media, said in their 2008 book *Grand Theft Childhood* that most young players understand that games like "Grand Theft Auto" are fantasy. And, unlike a movie, players can change the story — turning a "scary story into something where someone is saved," Olson says. "You always know it's a fantasy; if you want to stop doing it, you can stop." Video games also offer children a chance for social interaction and an ego boost when they beat adults — benefits that have not been thoroughly studied, Olson says. And children they surveyed said playing the game reduced their stress.<sup>27</sup>

But Cantor is skeptical. She says Kutner and Olson discounted their own study results indicating increased aggressive behavior among teenagers who played M (Mature) rated video games. The authors, she says, instead emphasized the kids' own opinions about why they play games and their own statements that they felt less aggressive afterwards. "[I]t doesn't take a research expert to have doubts about a child's willingness to admit that something he or she loves to do is harmful," she wrote in a review.<sup>28</sup>

Steven J. Kirsh, a psychology professor at The State University of New York at Geneseo, said research shows players can gain a sense of independence and accomplishment when they rack up points and are cheered by their peers.<sup>29</sup> And Stetson's Ferguson says some studies have indicated that violent games may improve hand-eye coordination, increase social involvement and be educational, but he says more research is needed in that area.<sup>30</sup>

James Paul Gee, an Arizona State University professor of literacy studies who has analyzed the educational value of video games, said many games portray warfare as heroic and a confirmation of various cultural models, which provides pleasure and allows players to experience the world from different perspectives.<sup>31</sup>

In *Everything Bad Is Good For You*, journalist Steven Johnson described an underlying "sleeper curve" effect of new technology. "The most debased forms of mass diversion — video games and violent television dramas and juvenile sitcoms — turn out to be nutritional after all" by increasing cognitive abilities, he wrote.<sup>32</sup>

But Murray says he hasn't seen evidence that violent video games are psychologically beneficial and says there must be other ways to improve focus, reaction time and eye-hand coordination without violence.

Some critics say only depictions of violence in which good reigns over

evil can provide positive lessons for consumers. Others disagree. "Unfortunately, the entertainment industry seems to confuse the fact that people like *action*, not violence," the University of New Mexico's Strasburger said. "Action doesn't have to involve shooting, blood spurting or bones breaking."<sup>33</sup>

Common Sense Media's McClain-Delaney decries some video games' "almost pornographic" depictions of violence against women, including raping and maiming, such as in the M-rated game "Manhunt 2."

The effects of such media are not yet thoroughly understood, she says. "This is the No. 1 important messenger to our kids . . . so I find it interesting that we are doing a big experiment on our kids, in a way."

### ***Should the government regulate violence in media?***

The Supreme Court has said over the years — beginning in 1968 in *Ginsberg v. New York* — that the government can regulate sexual content in media, but the court has never permitted restrictions on media violence. And while some media industries voluntarily provide ratings to help parents monitor their children's entertainment, critics increasingly suggest they need to do more to better inform parents and limit children's access to the most violent media content.<sup>34</sup>

The University of Pennsylvania's Romer says network programs and movies "should have more warnings, just as they do with drugs. Watch a drug ad on TV, and half the ad is about the side effects." Viewing violence likely has a different effect on different people, but so do drugs, he says. "Even tobacco doesn't kill everybody, but we have a lot of regulation on that."

Romer advocates "giving people full disclosure" about the level of violence in PG-13 movies. "What we have now is just false advertising," he says of the current movie rating systems. "It's true for video games, too."



## Violent Video Games Are Among Top Sellers

Half of the 10 top-selling video games of 2012 were rated M for Mature, meaning they were deemed suitable only for those ages 17 and older because they contained intense violence, blood and gore, sexual content or strong language. The rest were rated E, or suitable for Everyone.

### Top 10 Video Games and Their Ratings, 2012

1. **Call of Duty: Black Ops II (M)**
2. **Madden NFL 13 (E)**
3. **Halo 4 (M)**
4. **Assassin's Creed III (M)**
5. **Just Dance 4 (E)**
6. **NBA 2K13 (E)**
7. **Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 (M)**
8. **Borderlands 2 (M)**
9. **Lego Batman 2: DC Super Heroes (E)**
10. **FIFA Soccer 13 (E)**

Source: "Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry," Entertainment Software Association, 2013, [www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa\\_ef\\_2013.pdf](http://www.theesa.com/facts/pdfs/esa_ef_2013.pdf)

Bushman agrees the current rating system is "confusing to parents," and Rockefeller, the West Virginia Democrat, said, "Overworked and stressed parents cannot be expected to always prevent their kids from viewing inappropriate content across a variety of devices." <sup>35</sup>

Strasburger, at the University of New Mexico, says "the onus should be on the makers of violent video games. It should be a product-liability issue." Video game producers "should have to show it is safe for a 13-year-old."

The University of Wisconsin's Cantor has several recommendations, including:

- Having the government fund or require media producers to finance public education programs;
- Requiring creation of a new uniform ratings system for all media formats;
- Allowing local communities to restrict sales of highly violent video games to young children; and
- Requiring the television industry to build a user-friendly v-chip — technology that allows individuals to block

certain content on their channels — which would accommodate an improved rating system.

The media industries say their current ratings systems are adequate. A 2013 survey by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), a self-regulatory body which establishes ratings on video games, found that 85 percent of parents are aware of the ratings system for games.

"The extensive tools and programs that ESRB provides to help parents are one reason that government efforts to regulate computer and video games are unlawful," the Entertainment Software Association says on its website. "The First Amendment protects interactive entertainment software, and the government generally cannot restrict their sale, any more than it can ban books or movies." <sup>36</sup>

The MPAA's Graves defends the film ratings system, which is run by a panel of parents with children ages 5 to 15 who, she says, are attuned to the views of their communities. The members

view up to three films a week, she says. The reviewers judge the levels of violence by what looks realistic. Typically brutal, graphic or persistent violence that is deemed "realistic" is rated R, and more "action-oriented" movies are PG-13.

"It's all subjective, obviously, to some degree . . . because all are parents, and they are reacting, hopefully, as parents would," she says.

Modern computer graphic imaging effects produce a new kind of on-screen violence, permitting depictions of flying robots and superheroes, Graves says. "So we have more frenetic type action violence [that] just didn't exist in that form a couple decades ago," she says. But that violence typically is rated PG-13 because "there's not a lot of brutality in it. I think there's an unreality to it that both parents and kids . . . don't see as threatening."

In MPAA surveys and focus groups, Graves says, "We hear we're getting the right information about the level of [violence] so [parents] can make the best choices." She has seen society's tolerance for certain material change over the past 20 years, she says, but if parents complain, it's typically about sexual material, not violence.

Graves acknowledges that it's easy for children to access movies online but says parents can limit access to computers and the Internet. "They can regulate what their children see," she says. "I don't think [the ratings] are outmoded."

McClain-Delaney suggests that rather than require the industry to create new ratings systems, for example, evaluating media content should remain the role of a nonprofit such as Common Sense Media, which provides its own detailed media ratings systems.

Gabe Rottman, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, which defends free-speech rights, also doesn't want the government involved. "The government shouldn't be in the business of policing access, be it by children or adults." <sup>37</sup>



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# BACKGROUND

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## Early Media

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Parents, educators, community and political leaders have raised concerns about violent imagery in entertainment for centuries, particularly in response to waves of social disorder. In ancient Greece, Plato and his mentor Socrates warned about the impact on young minds of repeated images and lines in poetry and plays. In the 18th and 19th centuries the novels of many writers, including Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne, sparked cries for censorship.<sup>38</sup>

In the early 20th century, broadsheet and tabloid newspapers offered sensationalized crime stories and comic strips some regarded as tools for teaching youth lawlessness. On Christmas Eve 1908, New York Mayor George B. McClellan Jr. closed the nickelodeons (small indoor movie exhibition spaces that cost 5 cents to enter) and called for an investigation of whether they were showing films on the Sabbath, in violation of city law. Several states created censorship laws, which the Supreme Court upheld in 1915 when it ruled that free speech protections in Ohio's constitution did not extend to motion pictures.<sup>39</sup>

By the late 1930s, kids could buy 10-cent comic books such as *Superman Quarterly Magazine*, gather around the radio to hear crime-packed thriller stories such as "Dig My Grave" and "Crimson Corpse" and watch films such as "The Great Train Robbery" that contained themes clergy feared glorified criminal behavior.<sup>40</sup> As radio, movies and comic books increasingly pervaded everyday life and crime rates increased, more communities questioned whether there was a link between violent content and aggressive behavior. The entertainment industries

promised self-regulation, and Congress failed to advance legislation similar to what the states had done.<sup>41</sup>

To avoid censorship, the movie industry created the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, but it was perceived as ineffective. In response it created the Motion Picture Production Code, known as the Hays Code, in 1930, requiring that "the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin" in movies shown in American theaters.<sup>42</sup>

By the 1940s, lawmakers in nearly 50 cities were trying to ban the sale of crime comics, so in 1948 the comic-book industry formed the Association of Comics Magazine Publishers with a code of editorial practices.

In 1952 the Supreme Court overturned its 1915 decision upholding movie censorship, stating: "If there be capacity for evil, . . . it does not authorize substantially unbridled censorship such as we have here."<sup>43</sup>

Yet, with juvenile crime rising sharply in the postwar years, complaints continued with each new movie with a violent theme, such as the 1955 film "Rebel Without a Cause." Congress by that time had decided to thoroughly review the potential causes of juvenile crime — including media violence — under the guidance of a new Senate panel chaired by Tennessee Democrat Estes Kefauver.

"The volume of delinquency among our young has been quite correctly called the shame of America," Kefauver said in opening the hearings in 1954. "If the rising tide of juvenile delinquency continues, by 1960 more than one-and-a-half million American youngsters from 10 through 17 years of age will be in trouble with the law each year." The panel was not solely looking at media as the cause of the problem, Kefauver said, and it was "not a subcommittee of blue-nosed censors. We want to find out what damage, if any, is being done to our children's minds by certain types of publications

which contain a substantial degree of sadism, crime and horror."<sup>44</sup>

Some of the hearings focused on the potential influence of violence in comic books. Fredric Wertham, a psychiatrist and author of *Seduction of the Innocent*, pointed at comic books as a major cause of juvenile crime. Holding up a comic book during a hearing, he said, "This is a baseball game where they play baseball with a man's head; where the man's intestines are the baselines."<sup>45</sup>

The committee found the link between comic books and juvenile crime unclear, but laid responsibility for oversight on parents and encouraged the industry to self regulate. The industry then agreed to beef up its earlier standards, creating the Comics Code Authority in 1954 that said "scenes of brutal torture, excessive and unnecessary knife and gun play, physical agony, gory and gruesome crime shall be eliminated."<sup>46</sup>

The panel also scrutinized the motion picture and television industries. William Mooring, media editor for *Catholic Tidings* in Los Angeles, complained that "criminal violence, human brutality, sadism and other psychopathic disorders" were increasingly portrayed in such films as "Blackboard Jungle" and "Black Tuesday." But actor Ronald Reagan, the future U.S. president, testified that films "are theatrical entertainment. . . . you cannot have successful theater unless your audience has an emotional experience of some kind. If it is comedy, they must laugh. If it is tragedy, they must cry."<sup>47</sup>

NBC Vice President Joseph V. Hefernan told the panel, "We are an organization of human beings. We make no claim to perfection in every program we broadcast." But he urged that television be allowed to remain a "free-enterprise competitive business."<sup>48</sup>

In the 1960s and '70s, several studies and government inquiries analyzed the effects of television and film violence on children and adolescents, as leaders worried about civil rights demon-

strations, war protests and the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and civil rights leader the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. President Lyndon B. Johnson created the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, and Newton Minow, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), famously called commercial television a “vast wasteland” of crime, violence and advertising directed at children.<sup>49</sup>

In 1968 the Supreme Court upheld a New York law barring the sale of “obscene” materials to minors. That same year, Massachusetts parent Peggy Charren created the grassroots organization Action for Children’s Television (ACT), to lobby the FCC and Congress for better children’s programming.<sup>50</sup>

The momentum led to creation of the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in 1970 to offer educational programming. Jack Valenti, former special assistant to President Johnson who was named head of the MPAA, pushed for revisions in the movie industry’s code to include new movie ratings to better inform parents of movie content.<sup>51</sup>

### Media Debate Expands

In 1969, a report by President Johnson’s violence commission portrayed exposure to media violence as a cause of aggression and urged networks to reduce time given to violent programming. Congress resumed its hearings, but again was unable to come to a clear conclusion and asked the surgeon general to study the issue. The series of reports that followed in 1972 did not provide further clarity on whether children’s viewing of violence on television leads them to behave aggressively.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, violence in cartoons such as “Road Runner,” TV crime-fighting series such as “Starsky and Hutch” and “Hawaii Five-O” and made-for-TV movies such as “Born Innocent” brought more negative attention to the net-

works. The FCC received thousands of complaints from parents.<sup>53</sup>

In the 1980s President Reagan encouraged the industry to address the issue on its own. Under FCC pressure, the networks created a “family hour,” during which only material deemed appropriate for children would be shown. The ACT pushed for more, resulting in the Children’s Television Act of 1990, which called for all televisions to have v-chips. The broadcast industry followed in 1992 with its own guidelines on violent content. About that time, however, cable TV companies began to increase their offerings of violent-themed shows and movies, putting pressure on broadcast networks to boost their violent content to compete for viewers, according to some critics.<sup>54</sup>

Movies also remained under scrutiny. In 1984, the release of “Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom” led to an outcry among parents for its PG rating. Director Steven Spielberg called on the MPAA to create a new tier, and a year later it created the PG-13 rating.

Meanwhile, young-adult novels, which had emerged in the 1970s, were growing in popularity, even as they were criticized for focusing on teen issues such as drug use and the Vietnam War. The American Library Association inaugurated its annual “Banned Book Week” in 1982, a series of events held in September each year to raise national attention to the ALA’s anticensorship efforts.

That same year, the Supreme Court ruled that students’ First Amendment rights were violated when junior and senior high school libraries removed from their shelves Kurt Vonnegut’s 1969 World War II novel *Slaughterhouse Five* and eight other titles for portrayals of violence and other reasons.<sup>55</sup>

Video games became popular in the 1970s, when children began frequenting video arcades offering coin-operated games. “Death Race,” in which the player controlled a car to run down gremlins, led the National Safety Council in 1976 to state, “The person is no longer

a spectator, but now an actor in the process of creating violence.”<sup>56</sup>

Over the next 15 years, video games grew in popularity and attracted the attention of researchers and lawmakers. But courts again ruled that laws limiting violent content violated the First Amendment. In 1992, the Eighth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals invalidated a statute restricting minors’ access to violent video games, stating, “Unlike obscenity, violent expression is protected by the First Amendment.”<sup>57</sup>

Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., was undeterred and warned of the negative impact on youth of such games as “Mortal Kombat” and “Night Trap.” Lieberman (who later became an independent) and Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., held hearings in 1993 and called for industry regulations. The next year, game producers responded by creating the Entertainment Software Ratings Board and a voluntary standard for age ratings on video games.<sup>58</sup>

Meanwhile, clergy and parents voiced concerns about violence in music lyrics. Critics in the 1960s and ’70s had protested violent imagery in lyrics by heavy metal groups such as Judas Priest and Motorhead. In 1979 rap music was introduced in America, and music videos began to be broadcast on television’s MTV network, upsetting parents with their sometimes violent lyrics and imagery. In 1985, the new Parents Music Resource Center led by Tipper Gore — wife of then-Sen. Al Gore, D-Tenn. — encouraged the Senate to consider legislation requiring record labeling. The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) responded by voluntarily labeling albums containing explicit content.

In 1996 the American Academy of Pediatrics issued guidelines for parents, warning particularly against heavy metal and “gangsta rap” — a type of hip-hop music with lyrics reflecting urban crime.<sup>59</sup> A Senate panel the following year looked into whether such music might be related to violent juvenile crime. Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., said such

*Continued on p. 156*

# Chronology

## 1900-1948

**Media industry begins to regulate itself.**

**1915**

Supreme Court allows states to restrict motion picture industry.

**1930**

Movie industry creates the Motion Picture Production Code.

**1948**

Supreme Court rules magazines depicting crime and bloodshed are “as much entitled to the protection of free speech as the best of literature.”

## 1950s-1960s

**Congress investigates link between media violence and juvenile crime.**

**1952**

Supreme Court overturns decision on state censorship.

**1952-1955**

House and Senate committees hold hearings on media violence.

**1968**

President Lyndon B. Johnson creates commission on violence following political assassinations. . . . Congress holds hearing on media violence.

## 1970s-1980s

**Federal agencies seek to reduce TV violence.**

**1972**

Surgeon general’s committee reports TV violence can encourage aggressive behavior among youth.

**1975**

Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandates a family viewing hour on TV.

**1982**

National Institute of Mental Health concludes TV violence contributes to increased aggression in youth.

**1985**

Senate hearings result in music industry agreement to label albums containing explicit content.

## 1990s Media violence concerns shift to video games.

**1990**

Childrens’ Television Act requires networks to provide educational programming.

**1993**

Lawmakers hold hearings on violent video games.

**1996**

Telecommunications Act requires content ratings and “v-chips.”

**1999**

Mass shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado; the teenage shooters reportedly were influenced by violent movies and video games.

## 2000s Media violence targeted following rampages.

**2000**

Senate Commerce Committee investigates violent video games.

**2001**

Surgeon general says exposure to

media violence can increase a child’s aggressive behavior but that specific predictions are impossible.

**2002**

U.S. Secret Service finds no common link among mass shootings.

**2005**

Senators offer bills to require labeling of indecent and violent TV programming, evaluate the v-chip and to bar sales of graphically violent video games to minors. . . . American Psychological Association calls for reduction in violence in video and computer games.

**2007**

FCC seeks to regulate TV violence; 10 days later, Virginia Tech student kills 32 people on campus. . . . Senate holds hearing on media violence.

**2009**

Federal Trade Commission investigates marketing of violent entertainment to children.

**2011**

Supreme Court rejects California law barring sale of certain violent video games to minors.

**2012**

Mass shootings in Aurora, Colo., theater and at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut heighten focus on violent media.

**2013**

White House calls for study into causes of gun violence, including violent video games and media images. Flurry of federal and state bills address media violence but stall due to industry opposition.

**2014**

School and mall shootings further intensify debate about effects of media violence on youth.



## Teaching Kids to Be Media Savvy

*Special curricula teach how media influence attitudes and behaviors.*

**E**ighth-graders in Brad Koepenick's class quietly watch a scene from the 1985 R-rated film "Witness." Actor Harrison Ford's character, John Book, a New York cop undercover as an Amish farmer, rides a wagon into a town where suddenly a group of local youths block the street to taunt an Amish family in another wagon.

An Amish elder accompanying Book warns, "It happens sometimes. Do nothing. It's not our way." Book responds, "But it's my way." He saunters up to one of the young men, who knocks Book's hat off his head and laughs. Book says, "You're making a mistake," then punches him to the ground.

The students cheer loudly until Koepenick asks them how someone else might respond to the scene. How would a 6-year-old boy view it? A New York cop? An Amish man? Quickly the students quiet down, and the lesson proceeds. Later students reconstruct the scene with different endings — negotiation, surrender, avoidance or a search for help.

"I believe one of the most engaging elements of this is teaching students about breaking the cycle of violence," says Koepenick. Now a communications teacher at Charter High School of the Arts, Multimedia and Performing, in the Los Angeles suburb of Van Nuys, Koepenick participated in a 2007-'08 study of middle school students to test the effectiveness of a curriculum titled "Beyond Blame," developed by the Center for Media Literacy, an educational organization based in Malibu, Calif.

The curriculum is intended to increase students' awareness of media violence, reduce associated aggressive behavior and en-

courage a change in media-consumption habits. Positive results from the initial study, though slightly more limited than researchers desired, nonetheless led them to conclude that the curriculum may "prompt youth to protect themselves by changing the types of media they use or by reducing total consumption."<sup>1</sup>

As courts repeatedly reject efforts to limit children's exposure to media violence, some researchers, lawmakers and medical associations advocate approaches that help educate students about media influences. And an increasing number of studies indicate such approaches can be effective.<sup>2</sup>

Koepenick this year is incorporating "Beyond Blame" into his ninth-grade communications class. He says the curriculum helps him teach filmmaking while turning many students into "media-literate foot soldiers" eager to teach others about the use and effects of media messages.

Koepenick's lessons entail viewing clips from movies and television shows such as "South Park" and video games like "Grand Theft Auto." Students analyze scenes of conflict or violence and discuss whether they are realistic, appropriate or excessive. They also tackle questions on producers' use of creative techniques, different interpretations of the same message and lifestyles shown or omitted. In addition, students discuss news articles about violence in American society and potential media influence.

The lesson is not that media violence is bad, Koepenick says. "My favorite movie is 'Godfather Part II.' I'm also a filmmaker, so I'm not going to tell you media violence is bad." Instead, the

*Continued from p. 154*

crime had spiked more than 500 percent over 30 years. He raised concerns about contemporary music, citing such songs as "Don't Trust a Bitch" by the group Mo Thugs, "Slap a Ho" by Dove Shack and "Stripped, Raped and Strangled" by Cannibal Corpse.

One parent cried as he described how his 15-year-old son committed suicide while listening to his favorite Marilyn Manson song, "The Reflecting God." The song included the lyrics: "Each thing I show you is a piece of my death/One shot and the world gets smaller/Shoot here and the world gets smaller/Shoot shoot shoot."

"I would say the lyrics to this song contributed directly to my son's death," the father said.<sup>60</sup>

Concerns about Manson's music resurfaced after the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, in which students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 12 other students and a teacher before committing suicide. Lieberman and conservative pundit William Bennett blamed Manson's violent lyrics, which the students reportedly had listened to. But the boys also allegedly had repeatedly watched the movie "Natural Born Killers" and played the violent video game "Doom." Parents of some of the victims unsuccessfully sued the video game manufacturers for contributing to their children's deaths.<sup>61</sup>

In a 2000 report requested by President Bill Clinton, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) concluded that the music, film and video game industries market-

ed violent content directly to children and teenagers. It recommended they improve self-regulation, establish marketing guidelines and enforce retail restrictions, but few changes were made.<sup>62</sup>

### Increasing Pressures

**A**t that point, the research and medical community was strongly promoting studies showing a correlation between media violence — in television, film, video games and music — and real-life aggression.<sup>63</sup>

Rap and punk rock music continued to worry parents and lawmakers, triggering more hearings on the effects of violent lyrics by performers such as Eminem and others.

lesson is to critically analyze scenes and language. “We talk about the fact that nothing is random and everything is intentional.”

After discussing media examples, the students use computers or other available technology to create their own videos, cartoons or other productions. In the final lesson, students divide into teams representing government, media producers, teachers, community leaders and parents to discuss next steps. Answers range from censoring one’s own habits to teaching younger children about media violence.

Meanwhile, elementary schools in New Hampshire are seeking to use a similar curriculum devised and tested by Media Power Youth (MPY), a nonprofit organization in Manchester, N.H. In December, Democratic Gov. Maggie Hassan announced an initiative between the state Department of Education and MPY to help the nonprofit further develop its media-literacy curriculum for fifth-graders and train interested elementary faculty. A \$100,000 state grant will cover expenses to train faculty and incorporate the curriculum into any elementary schools interested in the program.

By January, 75 New Hampshire communities had shown interest in the curriculum, which also includes instruction on bullying, alcohol and tobacco use and unhealthy foods. News of the announcement prompted phone calls from schools outside the state, although they would need to seek separate funding to pursue the coursework and training, according to MPY.

The curriculum uses clips of commercials, television shows, films and video games as well as paintings to prompt discus-

sion about media messages and alternatives to conflict resolution. It was tested three times, according to MPY Executive Director Rona Zlokower, most recently during the 2009-’10 school year in fifth-grade health and art courses at two elementary schools in Manchester.

Some of the results were unexpected. One analysis showed a small increase in the reported likelihood to be verbally aggressive among students taking the curriculum. But researchers found that critical thinking among students in the program had improved, and they concluded prospects for the curriculum were promising.<sup>3</sup>

“It helps children understand how media influence their attitudes and behaviors,” Zlokower says. “By doing so, it reduces their vulnerability to how media influence them. The reality is kids are surrounded by this all day, all night. We are not really showing them things they haven’t seen before. We are slowing it down for them and making them think about it.”

— *Christina L. Lyons*

<sup>1</sup> Kathryn R. Fingar and Tessa Jolls, “Evaluation of a school-based violence prevention media literacy curriculum,” *Injury Prevention*, Aug. 16, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example Victor C. Strasburger, “Pediatricians, Schools, and Media,” *Pediatrics*, 2012; Jeff Share, “The Earlier the Better, Expanding the Deepening Literacy with Young Children” in J. Share, *Media Literacy is Elementary: Teaching Youth to Critically Read and Create Media* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> David S. Bickham and Ronald G. Slaby, “Effects of a media literacy program in the U.S. on children’s critical evaluation of unhealthy media messages about violence, smoking, and food,” *Journal of Children and Media*, 2012.

“If you think that this type of graphic violence has no effect on our kids, well, think again,” House Energy and Commerce Subcommittee Chairman Fred Upton, R-Mich., said in July 2001. “If you don’t believe me, ask the parents at Columbine.” He said while hundreds of kids aren’t shooting others, many are “pushing, shoving and assaulting each other with greater frequency and greater anger than ever before.”<sup>64</sup>

In Colorado Springs in 2007, police publicly blamed gangsta rap for contributing to the city’s growing murder rate. Meanwhile, Mexican and Mexican-American singers grew in popularity with songs glorifying drug war violence south of the U.S. border.<sup>65</sup>

A series of reports concluded that solutions such as the v-chip and self-

regulation were not taming primetime television viewing among children. TVs in most households were not equipped with v-chips, according to several reports, and increasing levels of violence appeared on broadcast television, according to the Parents Television Council, which suggested that Congress consider including violence in the category of “indecent” content to be regulated by the FCC.<sup>66</sup>

Access to violent cable television shows outside the traditional “family hour” slot, a growing number of youths watching late-night television and new recording technologies made the v-chip useless. In 2007, the FCC said it could further regulate TV if Congress passed legislation that essentially called for restrictions on “excessively violent programming that is

harmful to children” and that also applied to cable and satellite. It also suggested that broadcasters pledge to air violence-free programming during prime time hours, and that cable and satellite operators offer customers “a la carte” menus of stations.<sup>67</sup>

Ten days after the FCC’s statement, Virginia Tech University student Seung-Hui Cho shot and killed 32 people on campus. The massacre sparked new congressional hearings, in which Parents Television Council President Tim Winter advocated that Congress grant FCC greater regulatory authority over TV content. But Harvard law professor Laurence Tribe warned the FCC’s recommendations would violate the First Amendment.<sup>68</sup> Two years later, FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski told sen-

# Entertainment Firms Spend Big on Lobbying

*Legislation to curb media violence has stalled.*

Video game manufacturers and other entertainment companies are spending millions of dollars a year on lobbying, in part to fend off new laws and regulations on violent content.

The Center for Responsive Politics, a nonprofit research group in Washington that tracks political spending, ranked the television, movie and music industries as ninth in lobbying expenditures for 1993-2013, with spending totaling nearly \$1.2 billion. That was close to what the oil and gas industries spent, though less than half the pharmaceutical industry's lobbying expenditures.

The National Cable and Telecommunications Association, which has sought to monitor a range of issues affecting the cable industry, including potential legislation regarding programming, spent nearly \$19.9 million on lobbying in 2013 alone, more than four times its 1998 level.<sup>1</sup> The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), a trade association representing the six major Hollywood studios, spent nearly \$2.2 million. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA), which represents video game makers and other technology companies, spent more than twice that much — \$5.21 million, not including money paid to outside lobbyists. The ESA's lobbying focused not only on issues related to video game violence but also on a range of other matters.<sup>2</sup>

Michael Gallagher, chief executive of ESA, acknowledged his organization's role last year in helping to block several pro-

posed state laws designed to encourage further study into the effects on youth of violent video games — primarily because they singled out his industry, he said. He cited one such proposal in Maryland. "Why would the movie 'The Godfather' not be included?" he asked.<sup>3</sup>

Last July, the U.S. Senate Commerce Committee advanced a bill by Sen. John "Jay" Rockefeller, D-W.Va., calling for a study on whether violent video games and other programming have a negative effect on youths. The ESA, as well as the movie, cable and TV industries, issued statements saying they welcomed "further academic examination of the reasons behind societal violence." But the ESA has pushed for any study to take into account research that shows little or no link between video game violence and actual violence. The measure remained stalled early this year.<sup>4</sup>

Lawmakers hoping to protect children from violent entertainment appear frustrated at what they see as the entertainment industry's power to thwart new laws. Sen. Frank Wolf, a Virginia Republican, complained last year that the video game industry had "so many" lobbyists in Washington, he could become wealthy working for them.

Wolf and Rockefeller for several years have aimed to limit children's exposure to violent media content, particularly video games, only to see their measures stall. "Major corporations, including the video game industry, make billions on marketing and selling violent content to children," Rockefeller said. "They

ators the commission would investigate the state of programming for kids.

Meanwhile, Sen. Rockefeller and others grew increasingly concerned about violent video games. In 2000, the Senate Commerce Committee held a hearing on the impact of such games, but legislative options remained limited because courts repeatedly ruled that violent video games were protected expression under the First Amendment and that research had not shown a causal link to actual violence.<sup>69</sup>

Brownback expressed frustration with industry expectations that the media could not be regulated. "The First Amendment guarantees the right to free speech," he said in March 2006. "What too many in the industry fail to realize is that this right is not without limits, particularly when it comes to

minors." He referred to two Supreme Court cases, *Sable Communications v. FCC* and *Ginsburg v. New York*, which had permitted the government to intervene when concerned about the well-being of minors.<sup>70</sup>

More shootings further heightened the public debate. In July 2011, Norwegian mass murderer Breivik bombed government buildings in Oslo, killing eight, then opened fire on summer vacationers at a lakeside resort, killing 69, mostly teenagers. A year later, gunman James E. Holmes opened fire in a movie theater in Aurora, Colo., killing 12 people and wounding 70. That December, the mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School again launched investigations into the cause of youth violence. Parent advocacy groups urged that media standards be

strengthened, and federal lawmakers sought avenues for further regulation, such as requiring certain video games to carry health warnings.<sup>71</sup>

But in the wake of the Supreme Court's 2011 decision striking down the California law, regulatory solutions seemed elusive to many. ■

## CURRENT SITUATION

### Federal Efforts

Federal and state lawmakers seeking ways to limit children's and ado-



have a responsibility to protect our children.”<sup>5</sup>

Many critics of the entertainment media who want to see a reduction in children’s exposure to media violence suggest the video game industry is battling laws calling for further studies because it is more interested in preserving profits. The adult-rated video game “Grand Theft Auto V” grossed \$800 million in the first 24 hours of sales last fall and more than \$1 billion in its first three days on the market.<sup>6</sup>

The ESA, MPAA and National Cable and Television Association launched public awareness campaigns about their ratings systems after the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn, in which 20-year-old Adam Lanza, reportedly a heavy consumer of violent video games, shot and killed 20 students and six adults.

The industry has found support among some members of Congress, who in 2011 formed the Caucus for Competitiveness in Entertainment Technology, in part to support the video game industry. Moreover, Constance Steinkuehler, a professor of digital media at the University of Wisconsin who served briefly as senior policy analyst for the White House Office of Science and Technology, told Vice President Joseph Biden after the Sandy Hook shootings that research findings on links between violence and video games were inconclusive.

Until recently, several video game producers had ties to wealthy gun manufacturers, promoting brand-name assault rifles and pistols in their games, such as those made by Colt, found in Elec-

tronic Arts’ game “Battlefield 2.” Electronic Arts parted ways with Colt after the National Rifle Association (NRA) targeted the video game industry for blame following the Newtown shootings. However, Electronic Arts spokesman Jeff Brown denied the company’s decision was in response to NRA comments.<sup>7</sup>

Such examples underscore the difficulty of passing strong regulations, suggests April McClain-Delaney, Washington director of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit that provides information for educators and parents about media content. “It’s hard,” she says, “because there are so many competing interests lobbying on all these issues.”

— *Christina L. Lyons*

<sup>1</sup> Center for Responsive Politics, [www.opensecrets.org/lobby/](http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Senate Lobbying Disclosure Database, <http://tinyurl.com/djbc2e>.

<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Levitz, “Videogame Makers Fight Efforts to Study Link to Violence,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 10, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/k2ap3wo>.

<sup>4</sup> “Sen. Jay Rockefeller’s Violent Content Research Act Gets Greenlight from Senate Committee, Includes Video Games,” *Game Politics.com*, July 30, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/jwtncz7>.

<sup>5</sup> “Rockefeller Introduces Bill to Study Violent Video Games Impact on Children,” press release, <http://tinyurl.com/cb5josw>.

<sup>6</sup> Erik Kain, “‘Grand Theft Auto V’ Crosses \$1 B in Sales; Biggest Entertainment Launch in History,” *Forbes*, Sept. 20, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/kqfmloo>.

<sup>7</sup> Malathi Nayak, “Electronic Arts severing ties with gun manufacturers, but not their guns,” *Financial Post*, May 8, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/leahn2>; and Barry Meier and Andrew Martin, “Real and Virtual Firearms Nurture a Marketing Link,” *The New York Times*, Dec. 24, 2012, <http://tinyurl.com/c5j4wde>.

lescents’ exposure to media violence face continued divided opinion on whether their concerns are supported by the science. In addition, courts remain averse to infringing on free speech rights, even as public pressure intensifies for lawmakers to do something to prevent school shootings and other massacres.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is studying the causes and prevention of gun violence, including the impact of gun safety technology, mental health care and violent video games and media images. A report, ordered by President Obama after the Sandy Hook massacre, is expected within three to five years.<sup>72</sup>

Several lawmakers want the entertainment industry to shoulder more responsibility. “As a grandparent or parent, to pretend these violent video games don’t

make a difference — it’s crazy,” said Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., who favors action against the video game industry. “Ever seen ‘Grand Theft Auto?’ It is violent,” he said. “Garbage in, garbage out.”<sup>73</sup>

Wolf, who will retire from Congress in 2015, reportedly is considering legislation to require reduced-violence versions of video games with less realistic images. In a report requested by Wolf, the National Science Foundation recommended further study on the connection between youth violence and exposure to media violence, including how violent media affect certain vulnerable individuals and the potential benefit of a universal rating system for all media.<sup>74</sup>

Rockefeller, who is also retiring next year, has proposed a bill that would have the National Academy of Sciences examine the impact on children of vi-

olent video games and “violent video programming” and whether there is a causal connection to actual violence. He remains concerned about controlling youth’s access to other violent content as well. (*See “At Issue,” p. 161.*)

Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, wants to ban sales and rentals of video games rated M (Mature) and AO (Adults Only) to anyone younger than 17 or 18, respectively.<sup>75</sup>

Rep. Kevin Brady, a Texas Republican, believes “the relentless, in-your-face glorification of violence promoted on our TV screens and in the movies” is of greater concern than video games in general, which he said are “a healthy form of education and entertainment for our family.”

Meanwhile, the Parents Television Council supports legislation offered by

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., that would force cable providers to offer channels “a la carte,” permitting parents to choose Disney but not MTV, for instance.<sup>76</sup>

Federal officials indicate they are open to solutions. “Even without legislation, Congress can play an important oversight role that pushes the industry to do a better job of policing itself,” Rockefeller said. White House Press Secre-

issue. MPAA chairman and CEO Christopher Dodd, a former Democratic senator from Connecticut, said he had reached out to the administration after the Newtown shooting.

“Those of us in the motion picture and television industry want to do our part to help America heal,” Dodd said. Meanwhile, both the MPAA and the ESA began campaigns in 2013 to bet-

ten by Democratic California state senator and child psychologist Leland Yee, and said their own states “are vitally interested in protecting the welfare of children and in helping parents raise them.”

States continue to pursue solutions. New Jersey Republican Gov. Chris Christie in 2013 signed into law a measure requiring the state Department of Education to provide information for parents on how to limit children’s exposure to violent images or themes. Two other bills offered in 2013 but that did not reach the governor’s desk would have required parental consent for minors to purchase games labeled Adult or Mature.

Several other states considered video game laws in 2013, but they were not enacted. Some were versions of earlier proposals, and some likely will be reintroduced this year. They included:

- A Massachusetts Senate measure to create a commission to study the social benefits of video games, their potential connections to violence and First Amendment issues related to the games.
- A Connecticut law to impose a 10 percent sales tax on video games rated M (Mature), with proceeds going to state mental health services and for training on the warning signs of video game addiction. The legislature also considered a bill to bar minors from playing violent video games at public arcades.
- An Oklahoma measure that would have imposed a 1 percent excise tax on violent video games.
- A Missouri proposal by a Republican lawmaker for a 1 percent sales tax on violent video games. The tax would have been used to help pay for mental health programs and law enforcement measures aimed at preventing mass shootings.



Getty Images/NBCU Photo Bank/Felicia Graham

Canadian actress Tracy Spiridakos plays Charlotte “Charlie” Matheson in the post-apocalyptic science fiction series “Revolution.” Although the NBC broadcast drama is rated as appropriate for viewers 14 and older, a recent study showed it contained more violence than any of the cable shows examined – including “Bullet in the Face” and “American Horror Story” – that were aimed at mature audiences, defined as viewers over 17.

tary Jay Carney said government didn’t necessarily have to intervene, but could “elevate issues that are of concern.”<sup>77</sup>

The Media Coalition, which represents a range of media industries, strongly opposes censorship, but said, “The good news is that the debate may be slightly more measured than in years past. This time around, most proposals tend more toward scholarship than censorship. Not all politicians are jumping on the media-causes-violence bandwagon.”<sup>78</sup>

The MPAA, National Association of Broadcasters, National Cable and Telecommunications Association and Independent Film and Television Alliance have said they are willing to help address the

ter educate the public about their ratings systems while continuing to oppose federal or state regulation.<sup>79</sup>

## State Efforts

Several states are seeking ways to address media violence in the wake of court rulings. Attorneys general from 11 states filed a brief supporting California’s video game law when it was being considered by the Supreme Court.\* They defended the law, writ-

\* The states were Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Texas and Virginia.

## Latest Research

An American Psychological Association (APA) task force is analyzing

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# At Issue:

## *Should the entertainment industry be required to help reduce children's access to media violence?*



**SEN. JOHN "JAY" ROCKEFELLER**  
*CHAIRMAN, SENATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE*

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, FEBRUARY 2014

**P**rotecting children from questionable video content, especially content filled with violence, has been a deeply personal and important issue to me during my time as a senator. For years I have questioned why the nation's media conglomerates continue to include so much violence in their video programming and have called on them to show restraint in how much violence they sell. Yet each year they seem to increase the violence to the point where such content is virtually unavoidable.

Today, children often consume hours of video content — both through television programming and video games. By the time they are 18, they have seen tens of thousands of violent images on television, the Internet and in video games. I strongly believe — as do many parents, researchers and doctors — that these images have a negative effect on our children's mental and emotional well-being, especially during their formative years.

Video content of all forms permeates our everyday life. It has the power to inform, educate, entertain and better our society. But it also can expose children to the coarser side of human nature and affect their development in ways we still do not fully understand.

And as television programming and video games increasingly migrate to mobile devices and new distribution platforms, parents have even less control over what their children see. These changes in technology could amplify the impact of violent content on our society's most vulnerable members — a very disturbing development.

Although many researchers and doctors express certainty that violent media can harm children, no consensus exists. More work must be done. So, I introduced a bill that directs the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a comprehensive study on the impact of violent video games and programming on children. This legislation was passed unanimously out of the Commerce Committee, and I am looking at every possible avenue to pass it in the full Senate.

I am calling for this study because we seek answers — not blame. We all share a collective goal of keeping our children healthy and safe. The more we know about how the minds of our young are shaped and formed, the more we can do to help them thrive. The more we know about whether and how violent content affects different children in different ways, the more we can do to protect them from its harms.



**JOAN E. BERTIN**  
*EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL COALITION AGAINST CENSORSHIP*

WRITTEN FOR *CQ RESEARCHER*, FEBRUARY 2014

**V**iolence has always been a fact of life and remains a reality for many people. It also has occupied a central place in art and literature, including children's stories ("Hansel and Gretel"), classic texts ("The Odyssey") and religious art (Gustave Doré's illustrations in Dante's "Inferno"). If violence is an accepted subject of timeless art and literature, why question it in contemporary modes of expression?

New forms of expression have always aroused anxiety and calls for restrictions, often accompanied by pseudo-scientific claims of harm. For example, in the 1950s psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's now-discredited claims of harm nearly wiped out comic books in America.

Recently, the Supreme Court considered similar claims about video games and found that studies on the effects of violent games "show at best some correlation between exposure to violent entertainment and minuscule real-world effects [which] are both small and indistinguishable from the effect [of watching] cartoons starring Bugs Bunny or the Road Runner." Official reports from Sweden, Norway, Australia and Great Britain have reached similar conclusions.

A federal appeals court rejected such arguments about media violence even more emphatically, holding that shielding children "from exposure to violent descriptions and images would not only be quixotic, but deforming," leaving them "unequipped to cope with the world as we know it."

That doesn't mean individuals have to like media violence or watch it or allow their children to do so. They're free to make their own choices. However, they're not entitled to impose their view on others, or to expect the government or anyone else to do it for them.

If the question is whether the *government* should require the media and communications industries to reduce children's exposure to media violence, the answer is clearly "no." As Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy said in the 2000 majority opinion in *United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group*, the First Amendment "exists precisely so that opinions and judgments, including esthetic and moral judgments about art and literature, can be formed, tested and expressed. . . . [T]hese judgments are for the individual to make, not for the government to decree, even with the mandate or approval of a majority."

If not the government, who else? The idea of a private watchdog or industry group acting as culture czar to dictate taste is both implausible and chilling. There are all kinds of ratings and reviews for anyone who wants to use them. Isn't that good enough?



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peer-reviewed research on the impact of media violence and is reviewing its previous policy statements on the issue. Its work is expected to be complete in 2014.<sup>80</sup>

One group of scholars hopes the APA will revise its 2005 policy stating that research had shown clear negative effects from exposure to violence, including sexual violence, in interactive video games. In a written statement to the APA last September, the scholars (who include Ferguson, Freedman and others), said: “We are of the belief that the task force has a tremendous opportunity to change the culture of this research field to one which is less ideological and open to new theories, data and beliefs.”<sup>81</sup>

Meanwhile, researchers continue to analyze the effects of media violence. Romer, Bushman and others are collaborating on a study analyzing whether gun violence in video games has a different effect on players than violence on television or in a movie has on viewers. They also are comparing the effects of games with gun violence to other games, Romer says.

Researchers at Indiana University, the National Institutes of Health and other institutions are advancing studies using neuroimaging — contrast imaging that maps brain activity and the storage of images.

Meanwhile, some video game developers are testing new types of games. Video game director Navid Khonsari, who worked on “Grand Theft Auto III” and other games, has been leading a team in building a documentary game about the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Instead of just shooting back, players can help the wounded, sneak around to take photographs and smuggle evidence. “If I had conflict thrown at me in this particular situation, I’m not going to pick up a gun and charge soldiers, I’m going to try to get to safety, and I’m going to try to find the closest people to me and get them to safety,” Khonsari said.<sup>82</sup>

Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist and founder of the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, received a \$1.39 million grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop games that teach empathy and compassion rather than violence. Test results of the games, targeted at 8th-graders, are expected to be released this spring.

Other researchers are considering further studying the effects of interactive games as well as exposure to online hate groups, violent radical groups and sexual violence. ■

## OUTLOOK

### Debate Rages On

Court rulings have led to calls for more studies, and many researchers agree more could be done — including closer examinations of brain imaging techniques, more focus groups or refined studies on newer media. Murray of Washington College says he would like to see more detailed neuroimaging of where violent images are stored in the brain and how they are processed.

Ferguson of Stetson University hopes the Supreme Court’s decision overturning California’s video game sales law encourages scholars to be more cautious and conservative in their statements, which previously “expressed high certitude, made spurious comparisons with medical research . . . and increasingly spoke beyond what the data could support.”<sup>83</sup>

But Strasburger from the University of New Mexico and McClain-Delaney of Common Sense Media say tight federal budgets mean little money is available for media research. “The only research being funded is by the industry,” he says. “It’s a pretty bleak picture.”

Murray contends research already shows a link between entertainment violence and actual violence. “The future is really in education, media literacy and talking to parents,” he says. Groups such as the Center for Media Literacy and Media Power Youth are seeking to promote media literacy in all schools across the country.

Regardless, Murray, Wisconsin’s Cantor, Ferguson and others believe the public debate will continue, and a resolution will be difficult to reach.

“These things tend to run in obvious cycles,” Ferguson says. “For a while it was television. Even back to the 1930s, a lot of people were panicking about movies. Then it was rock [music] in the 1980s, then pornography and now video games.” Most adults fear video games because they are unfamiliar with them, he says.

McClain-Delaney believes legislative remedies will be slow but hopes some answer is found — particularly in light of children’s growing access to online media. “We don’t allow kids to drive until they are 16, drink until 21. They can’t be legally bound in a contract until they are 18,” she says. “But at 13, they are totally an adult in a digital world? That makes no sense, and that’s exactly the time the parent begins to retreat because they can’t track them.”

“What do we do? What does the FCC do? It’s a hard one,” she says. “I think the next step is to look at how we as a country want to balance our children’s well-being. How do we want to help them navigate the very violent content?”

But the industries and free speech advocates will continue to oppose media restrictions.

“States can’t target emerging media: As new technologies are invented, states cannot target them for restriction because of concern about the potential influence on children,” said Ken Paulson, president of the First Amendment Center, a program associated with The Freedom Forum, a nonpartisan foundation in Washington, D.C.

The Supreme Court's 2011 ruling in the California case "is a vibrant application of 219-year-old principles to cutting-edge technology and asserts that any new forms of communication or media to come will be protected by the First Amendment," he says.<sup>84</sup> ■

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## FOR MORE INFORMATION

**American Academy of Pediatrics**, 141 Northwest Point Blvd., Elk Grove Village, IL 60007-1098; 847-434-4000 or 800-433-9016; [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org). Provides background on media use and guidance for pediatricians, parents and educators.

**American Psychological Association**, 750 First St., NE, Washington, DC 20002-4242; 800-374-2721 or 202-336-5500; [www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org). Publishes research on the effects of violent media on children and adolescents.

**Center for Media Literacy**, 22837 Pacific Coast Highway, #472, Malibu, CA 90265; 310-804-3985; [www.medialit.org](http://www.medialit.org). Provides research, professional development and educational resources to support media literacy education.

**Center on Media and Child Health**, Children’s Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School and Harvard School of Public Health, 300 Longwood Ave., Boston, MA 02115; 617-355-2000; [www.cmch.tv](http://www.cmch.tv). Researches the effects of media on the physical, mental and social health of children.

**Common Sense Media**, 650 Townsend, Suite 435, San Francisco, CA 94103; 415-863-0600; [www.commonsensemedia.org](http://www.commonsensemedia.org). Provides educational materials about media for classrooms, ratings and reviews of books, movies, music, video and computer games, websites and apps.

**Entertainment Software Ratings Board**, 317 Madison Ave., 22nd Floor, New York, NY 10017; [www.esrb.org](http://www.esrb.org). Self-regulatory body created by the Entertainment Software Association that assigns ratings for video games and apps and enforces industry-adopted advertising guidelines.

**Media Coalition**, 19 Fulton St., New York, NY 10038; 212-587-4025; [mediacoalition.org](http://mediacoalition.org). Defends the First Amendment rights of booksellers, publishers, librarians, video game manufacturers and retailers and the recording industry.

**Media Power Youth**, 1245 Elm St. Manchester, NH 03101; 603-222-1200; [mediapoweryouth.org](http://mediapoweryouth.org). Works with public-health programs, schools and communities to teach media literacy to young people.

**Motion Picture Association of America**, 15301 Ventura Blvd., Building E, Sherman Oaks, CA 91403; 818-995-6600; [www.mpa.org](http://www.mpa.org). Provides a guide to film ratings and list of ratings of specific films.

**Parents Television Council**, 707 Wilshire Blvd., No. 2075, Los Angeles, CA 90017; 213-403-1300 or 800-882-6868; [w2.parentstv.org](http://w2.parentstv.org). Monitors prime time television shows and PG and G-rated movies; provides summaries for parents of certain films and shows, campaigns for TV ratings.

**Recording Industry Association of America**, 1025 F St., N.W., 10th Floor, Washington, DC 20004; 202-775-0101; [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com). Opposes efforts to censor music, including efforts to restrict sales to minors and to create a uniform labeling standard for the entertainment industry.

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**Ferguson, Christopher J., *Adolescents, Crime, and the Media: A Critical Analysis*, Spring Science+Business Media, 2013.**

A Stetson University psychology professor examines the debate about whether media consumption is related to youth crime and arguments over whether restrictions should be placed on media.

**Gentile, D. A., ed., *Media violence and children: A complete guide for parents and professionals*, 2nd ed., Praeger Publishing, in press.**

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# The Next Step:

## *Additional Articles from Current Periodicals*

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Jost, Kenneth. "Remembering 9/11." *CQ Researcher* 2 Sept. 2011: 701-732.

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