

'In confidence
until published'

(Home Affairs
Select Committee)

Memorandum of Evidence Regarding Amendment of the Criminal
Justice & Public Order Bill, 1994:

**ALLEGED CAUSAL LINKS BETWEEN
MEDIA VIOLENCE AND YOUTH CRIME**

Submitted by IAN VINE,
C.Psychol., AFBPSS

(Lecturer in Social Psychology,
Department of Interdisciplinary Human Studies,
University of Bradford)

June 1994.

Introduction

The proposed addition following Clause 82 of the Bill, to be moved by The Earl Ferrers, seeks to address widespread concerns regarding harmful effects of viewing violent and other morally problematic video material, particularly in stimulating youth crime. In principle, some tightening of the process of classifying videotapes according to their appropriateness for viewers of various ages is part of an appropriate response to the perceived problem. However, this does raise serious civil liberties problems because of the potential for over-zealous restriction of what adolescents and adults will be allowed to watch. These concerns will be addressed subsequently.

My main focus will be upon the nature and very suspect validity of the social scientific evidence for harmful effects of exposure to violent and other 'immoral' screen imagery. In turn I shall argue that such imagery has been made into an easy scapegoat for the public's concerns about rising levels of anti-social behaviour. And I shall outline an alternative conception of the causal processes linking screen imagery to harmful reactions. This emphasizes the inexcusable neglect of how inadequate moral socialization at home and school needs to be identified as the primary cause of anti-social conduct amongst young people. From this analysis it follows that the envisaged legislation is unlikely to have more than marginal impact upon the problems of youth crime.

**The quality of 'scientific'
evidence**

David Alton MP launched his original Amendment with a fanfare of publicity, asserting that a new report by respected child psychologist Prof. Elizabeth Newson (also approved by some 25 colleagues) had finally proved what ordinary people had long known about the harmfulness of screen violence.¹ What few people will have appreciated is that those professionals confessing to a change of heart on this issue came largely from the fields of normal and abnormal child development. They predominantly lacked the appropriate expertise in media communication (and in some cases psychological methodology) to assess such empirical evidence objectively.

The Newson report rightly attracted appreciable criticism from media researchers and senior psychologists for its startling naivety about other correlates of increasing violence, its lack of critical attention to defects in evidence cited, and its highly selective coverage of the studies on the topic. In fact Newson had no new data to report, no new theory, and only the weakest grounds for the rash opinions expressed. Yet Alton readily gained high media prominence for it by virtue of both his misleading rhetoric and how it fed into the current 'moral panic' about youth crime.

Negligible publicity was accorded to the details of the genuinely new empirical findings of a Policy Studies Institute report on *Young Offenders and the Media*, published at the same time.² This is an important work, since it looked systematically at 78 adolescent repeated offenders in the UK (primarily male), in proper comparison with control groups of other young viewers. The PSI researchers do not pretend to infer anything from people's consumption habits about how imagery might actually cause anti-social conduct. This immediately establishes it as a scientifically responsible study - in contrast to the many which illicitly draw such causal inferences when their methodology is not strong enough to support these. The main finding was that there were no very substantial differences in viewing habits or content preferences between the groups. Even the 30 offenders whose delinquency involved violence showed only normal levels of attraction to violence on screen. Their choices were typically diverse but mainstream. Similar minority percentages of offenders and non-offenders identified with 'macho' stars like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Given the modest sample sizes in this study, generalization to the youth population as a whole can only be tentative and provisional, as the authors readily acknowledge. No offenders had been involved in the most serious violent acts involving killing or rape - and possibly their media consumption would have been more distinctive. Data on whether or not there was atypically high exposure to screen violence earlier in childhood was not obtained. So whether this might have contributed to their later delinquency could not be established. Nor was there detailed questioning about the meanings offenders attributed to examples of screen violence. *But the fact remains that this study revealed none of the exposure differences one would expect if there was some potent general linkage between viewing violent or other crimes on screen and acting these out oneself.*

Establishing causation within the psychological realm is massively more difficult than lay-persons, medical practitioners, and too many American psychologists trained within the 'behaviourist' paradigm, will normally suppose. That is why it is so easy to find different 'experts', and differing empirical enquiries, flatly contradicting one another's conclusions. It may be frustrating for the public to be told that more evidence has to be gathered, when so many

reports have already appeared. But the reason is simple. *Too many researchers have repeatedly asked the wrong questions in the wrong ways - using quick and cheap methods to get almost worthless answers.*³ It is thus tempting for the public and the policy-makers to assume that their own intuitions are an adequate substitute for scientific knowledge.

This assumption could not be more misguided. One thing that psychologists really have firmly established is that lay intuitions about the causes of events are open to very seriously biased distortions of reasoning.⁴ Some preliminary observations about the nature of social scientific evidence are thus in order, before going on to examine what can in fact be legitimately inferred from the current state of empirical research on the impact of screen imagery.

The commonest lay misconception - of which even scientists like Newson can sometimes appear guilty - is to mistake associations ('correlations') between events for simple causes. For instance, if (a) screen portrayals of rape increase over some period, and simultaneously there is (b) a comparable rise in actual rapes, we simply cannot immediately make the common inference that (a) causes (b). It is equally plausible that more concern about rape increases audience demand for examinations of the offence in screen dramas and documentaries - i.e. (b) causes (a). Alternatively, some other factor, like (c) a fragmentation of societal institutions which hitherto upheld respect for other people's autonomy, could cause both (a) and (b).

The only way to resolve such uncertainties and reach scientifically valid conclusions involves very rigorous research procedures.⁵ Without such designs, *carefully selected* representative samples of persons and events, and statistical analyses able to reject chance results, nothing can be settled. Huge numbers of people investigated in the wrong ways tell us less than small samples studied scientifically. The problem of the generalizability of one's findings can be acute, as is how to interpret their meaning if the design confounds together several sources of variation. *In the judgement of myself and many other UK media researchers, much of the vast body of studies on effects of exposure to media violence simply cannot answer the questions it purports to, because of its scientific failings.*

Limitations of media effects research

It is not feasible here to examine each of the many empirical studies which do confidently conclude that screen violence somehow stimulates actual anti-social conduct. (Thus I cannot claim to prove here that none do contain good evidence for the reality of such effects.) But I can indicate through examples why it is that we often have good reasons for not taking an author's conclusions at face-value.

In psychology the most secure evidence usually comes from laboratory experiments in which rigorous control of conditions

of exposure to stimuli of interest, and of before-and-after response measures, can be achieved. Comparison with similar control groups not exposed to the stimuli is normally vital. *Thus it has been repeatedly shown that most children will learn novel patterns of aggressive play simply by observing an adult who models these on screen.* Children not exposed to the model do not show these patterns. Demonstrations of such imitative aggression by Albert Bandura helped to give rise to concern about filmed violence. They certainly prove that imitative learning from the screen is possible, and dispel the foolish claim that the media cannot affect behaviour at all. Yet levels of performance of the new skills were shown to be highly dependent upon how far the context encouraged the child to believe that the actions would gain adult approval and rewarding consequences. *Clearly the imagery was not an automatic trigger for imitation in real life.*

How far what people do or say in laboratory situations are representative of conduct elsewhere is always a problem for psychology - and acutely so where considerations of social approval and moral responsibility are relevant. And in the present context a great deal hinges on precisely what investigators choose to count as 'violent' imagery and conduct. One attempt to simulate experimental control in a natural situation is often quoted as strong evidence for the potency of the media, but falls foul of such problems. Joy, Kimball & Zabrack were able to compare children in a Canadian town before and after its late introduction of TV in 1974, as well as to contrast it with otherwise similar towns which had TV already. After two years, children were judged to be appreciably more aggressive than before, whereas those in the other towns showed no change.

These results seem clear-cut. Yet we must question the actual assessments of aggression - especially the one direct measure, namely observed playground aggression. That children will readily act out imitable features of violent screen scenarios in rough-and-tumble play proves little. Other research has found that for most children real and play fighting are unrelated, and rarely confused.⁶ *So we may hypothesize that imitation of screen violence is only likely to translate into real aggression for the minority of children whose social skills are already poor, or who are already emotionally disturbed.* Besides, in the Canadian study the increased 'aggressiveness' was not related to how much TV was watched - let alone how many violent programmes a child saw. Clearly TV-watching does change general family lifestyles in various ways, so any feature of such social changes within the community could have contributed to any genuine increase in aggression that did occur. Since several studies have now claimed effects independent of the specifically violent content of what is watched, another possibility is that TV encourages some people to act anti-socially by inducing aspirations for wealth and power which they cannot attain by legitimate means. Censoring screen violence itself would not address this problem.

The best evidence for the causal potency of screen violence upon anti-social conduct should come from longitudinal studies, in which exposure levels and behavioural measures are monitored for the same children over several years. Such studies are expensive and rare. Unfortunately, the enthusiasm of some eminent researchers who have performed these for their own positive results cannot conceal a further problem. Data from even the most large-scale studies - like those of Eron & Huesmann in the USA - have often been difficult to confirm when attempts have been made to replicate them elsewhere. Thus Wiegman, Kruttschreuter & Baarda recently reported on their Dutch study using several hundred 7-9 year-olds.⁷ Contrary to the American authors, they found no association between exposure and aggression once levels of prior aggressiveness and intelligence were taken into account.

Inconsistent empirical findings are normally a sign that researchers have used suspect methods, asked the wrong questions, or failed to consider important causal factors. Under pressure, even confident advocates of the harmful effects of screen violence mostly concede that their magnitude amongst young people as a whole is really quite modest, when set alongside other influences. One factor indicative of how other social processes are clearly involved is that of gender. Since being male is the main predictor of violent delinquency, and of post-pubertal associations between viewing violence and actual aggressiveness, off-screen learning of social norms evidently plays a major role. Most researchers also concede that realistic and situationally justified violence appears to have most impact after middle childhood (when fantasy/reality distinctions are already becoming sharpened). *This should arguably lead us to conclude that the obvious fantasy element in the most gruesome 'video nasties' makes them less worrying than mainstream police and crime programmes, or even some kinds of factual reportage.*

So contrary to the wilder claims about blanket effects of screen violence, the focus of researchers' concern has started to shift to more realistic questions which allude to 'vulnerable minorities' within both child and adult TV audiences. *But the main bulk of rigorous psychological studies to date reveals next to nothing about the numbers of vulnerable individuals or the precise personal factors causing vulnerability.* One limited discovery, however, is that the young people affected in harmful ways are probably not confined to those who are already chronically aggressive, or from the lowest social classes. Also, we can be fairly confident that viewing graphic violence perceived as causing pain to victims will disturb many of the youngest children - although it is far more likely to make them fearful than aggressive. Patently, the TV set will be a dangerous baby-sitter for those who have not yet learned the 'language' of the screen.⁸ *Without careful parental monitoring of programme content, and explanation and reassurance about anything the young child finds distressing, pre-school children in particular may be confused or disturbed - but not only by violent content.*

But until new scientific research looks far more closely at how older children actually interpret what they see, and at which of the constitutional and socialization differences in their backgrounds predict vulnerability, serious uncertainties are bound to remain. Needless to say, purely anecdotal evidence from isolated and often highly accurate media reports of children like the killers of James Bulger watching 'video nasties' is entirely worthless. Of more interest in this case is the fact that the boys were evidently disturbed and anti-social in a range of ways - and contrary to what the Newson report suggests, their family backgrounds were very far from morally healthy.⁹

Many psychiatrists and pediatricians claim to answer the important questions by reference to their 'clinical experience' and small-sample case studies involving intensive diagnostic or therapeutic interviews. *But unfortunately such clinical case studies rarely meet the scientific criteria required before generalizations can be attempted.* So they do little to clarify the general causal processes involved in becoming susceptible to screen violence.

One recent UK clinical study cited by Newson is potentially important, but illustrates the problems. Susan Bailey investigated 40 adolescent murderers, and claimed to find that "repeated viewing of violent and pornographic videos" was a substantial causal factor.¹⁰ Yet her brief report gives none of the methodological detail vital for assessing the study's scientific adequacy, and even fails to present the basic results comprehensibly. There is no reference to comparison of viewing habits with a control group of non-killers with comparable backgrounds. So it appears that she had no objective means of discerning what causal role video consumption might have played, and why. Her assertion that murderers and violent sexual offenders tend to be lacking in "internal boundaries...driven by distorted ideas, unstable and violent feelings, as well as deviant role models from real or fictional sources" is supported by other research. But this suggests that it is such underlying abnormality which causes deviant interpretations of and reactions to the screen material.

The causes of anti-social conduct

If research using clinical interview material usually lacks scientific rigour, then psychological experiments and quasi-experiments often have almost the opposite drawback. Because they mostly take so little account of subjective experience, they tend to encourage a distorted view of what causes people's actions. This involves singling out immediate external stimuli - like the images on a TV screen - and playing down mental factors. *The 'behaviourist' methodology of most psychological studies of media effects encourages the assumption that the viewer is essentially passive, and unable to control how the imagery affects him/her.* This in turn makes it easy to make media imagery into a scapegoat, by identifying it as a major cause of anti-social behaviour associated with

violent viewing preferences. *And to scapegoat the media is very convenient for politicians - since censorship is massively cheaper than correcting the underlying social causes of immorality and crime.*

The bias within psychological research requires brief explanation. Classical behaviourist theory saw the causation of human behaviour as not qualitatively different from that of animals like the infamous laboratory-bred rat. Concern to study what was most scientifically accessible and reliably observed led to a focus on external physical stimuli, and overt responses to these. Investigation of people's internal mental states was rejected as unscientific, since no observer could assess the accuracy of verbal reports of these. And with rats it often proved easy to make accurate predictions of responses to stimuli without such private information. Sometimes humans were just as predictable, so it was easy to conclude that conscious activities are not the true causes of what people do.

While these theoretical assumptions have long been discredited, their baleful legacy has continued - in a methodological reluctance to take serious account of how people are thinking and feeling during experiments. *In principle, psychologists now acknowledge that our actions hinge fundamentally upon how we attribute meaning to the external and internal events we perceive.* Hence different people may react very differently to the same external stimulus. Yet so many media studies, especially in the USA, still fail to ask people how they understand the scenes they watch and listen to, and how they then evaluate these in moral and other terms appropriate to deciding on any relevant actions of their own.

All too often, what the failure to probe for the subjective meaning of an image entails is that the researcher simply proceeds as if the people being studied will uniformly interpret the screen imagery as having the same meaning for them as it does for him/her. It becomes an untested act of faith that averaging the overt responses of all the viewers will suffice to yield data corresponding to the typical person's ascription of meaning. *But this neglect of mental data is a serious obstacle to discovering how some people are vulnerable to being harmed by screen violence.* The external approach is wildly inappropriate where several quite distinct interpretations are likely, according to the broad categories of preconceptions one might bring to bear. For instance, if a scene shows one person beating another, some viewers may become aggressively excited through identifying with the aggressor, while others are frightened by identifying with the victim.

Theoretical acknowledgement of the 'active viewer' perspective has scarcely been reflected in the methods used by rigorous scientific researchers, so what follows below must be somewhat speculative in terms of empirical evidence currently available. Nevertheless, a general account of the role of media images in causing behaviour gains support from other

fields of research. The immediate causes for how I react to some image lie partly in its overt content. To that degree its presence is an external triggering cause of what I do. *But most images will only produce a reaction at all if I first ascribe some mental meaning to them. This act of interpretation is an equally necessary internal triggering cause. To neglect the latter is to misunderstand profoundly what causes my emotional or behavioural reactions.*

Once we focus upon viewers' interpretations, it is evident that the assumptions we bring to watching TV are crucial to how we respond. For instance, if I categorize a scenario or programme as fantasy, I will not infer that it is any direct model or guide for my real-life conduct. But even if I take it as broadly realistic, there are numerous remaining questions concerning its relevance to my own situation. These depend upon things like whether I see myself as the same kind of person as that depicted on screen, whether I share their motives and goals, and so on. *Amongst the crucial factors in what lessons I learn from what I see on screen is how I judge the actions to accord or not with my own moral standards.* Thus, I may gain various escapist gratifications from watching the various aggressive and deceptive antics of a wrestling match, at the same time as my moral abhorrence of actually using these myself gets strengthened.

The crucial point here is that the viewer's moral and other evaluative standards for personal conduct are another key element in the complex causal network upon which reactions to screen imagery depend. Yet the moral dimension of responding to media messages has been ignored in virtually all media effects research. And it is precisely this which probably provides the main linkage to the other set of causal factors shaping our conduct. There are well-known correlates of anti-social and violent dispositions - in particular having aggressive parental role-models, being abused by brutal and unloving parents, being subjected to inconsistent discipline, and so on. These experiences are the root causes of deviant personality dispositions, and are important contributors to the weak internalization of moral norms.

This suggests that for the most seriously disturbed individuals, with demonstrable psychopathology, the primary cause of their anti-social conduct lies within their deviant personality, in turn caused mainly by their grossly inadequate parenting. They are very liable to interpret media imagery in abnormal ways, and use it to feed deviant desires and needs. But if what they view is sometimes an external trigger for a specific anti-social act, it is equally true that they will encounter numerous other such triggers off-screen. *In most cases their delinquent careers would be only superficially different without access to 'video nasties' and the like.*

But most adolescent delinquents end up as relatively normal and law-abiding adults, and do not show signs of enduring and serious psychological disturbance. In their case we can say that they are simply very slow in acquiring basic

moral maturity. They have not yet learned to treat others with respect and compassion, and to find legitimate ways to defer and ultimately satisfy their desires. *If 'normal delinquents' are in some cases vulnerable to being negatively affected by excessive exposure to screen violence, the primary cause is the immaturity of their moral evaluations of the characters and actions that they watch.* And the underlying cause is the poor quality of their early moral socialization within the family.

So here too, the real culprit is not what they see on screen, but the deficiencies in how they have learned to interpret and evaluate media imagery. If this is their problem, then they are no more likely to react to events in the real social world in a mature way. Protecting them from screen violence would again probably have only marginal effects on the overall incidence of their anti-social conduct. *Thus in my considered view, the existence of a minority of young people who constitute a vulnerable audience with regard to screen violence is in most cases symptomatic of their more general vulnerability.* Their upbringing has failed to provide them with a proper sense of moral obligation to others, and a readiness to act in socially responsible ways. Unless our educational and social service programmes address failures in their moral learning, they will still behave delinquently - however specific anti-social acts are externally triggered.

Overall, I suggest that society's focus on the easy target of screen violence is totally disproportionate - given the greater potency of other social experiences which can engender anti-social dispositions. The number of young people who are specifically hyper-sensitive to stimulation by screen violence itself may be very small indeed. Only properly conducted research of a kind not yet done will tell us how many. Attempts to restrict access to the more brutal and morally suspect videotape material according to age do make some sense - but are likely to have very limited success. Without responsible parenting, vulnerable children may still gain access to the forbidden fruit, and will still not learn to inhibit anti-social dispositions through the operations of conscience. Our priorities for intervention should surely lie with assisting inadequate parents in relevant material and educational ways.

Issues of censorship

The question which remains is how far a liberal adult society needs to go in protecting young people from the various potentially disturbing effects of media messages? If we do not seriously tackle the root causes of anti-social dispositions, no amount of media censorship may be effective anyway. And if it is imagery that is highest in realism, and has a factual context, which is most likely to be harmful to the morally immature, then how far will we have to emasculate the mass of TV and video material directed at the tastes and needs of adult audiences?

Liberal philosophies of freedom acknowledge the legitimacy of paternalism in our treatment of children, insofar as their immaturity precludes the full exercise of rights of self-determination and duties of social responsibility. However, it is clear that it would be quite inappropriate if the content of entertainment videotapes, and of television programming, were substantially determined by reference to protecting the youngest children from disturbing imagery. This is highlighted by the claim that only half of homes contain persons who are under-age anyway. Responsibility for control of what children watch on the screen has to be largely devolved to parents, if adults are not to be unreasonably deprived of the viewing they want.

It is all too easy to regard the blanket censorship of an ill-specified category of 'video nasties' as trivial incursions on freedoms of expression and reception. Yet vividly explicit productions of artistic works like *King Lear* or *Titus Andronicus* can lead adults to faint in theatres, just as newsreel scenes of human carnage can produce nightmares. The logic of censoring what may upset vulnerable minorities has no end-point short of abolishing everything which may challenge or offend anyone at all. Limiting children's access to adult media material where possible is one thing - but applying paternalistic censorship to what adults can watch violates basic rights.

People's choices of what to read, hear, and watch are already partially taken from them and put in the hands of paternalistic elites who judge what is or is not good for the masses. In the case of mainstream TV, we are already well on the way to banishing realism in the interests of avoiding offence to an increasing range of sensitive minority audiences. Other European countries include more explicit coverage of the bloody human consequences of violence in TV news and documentaries that is judged tolerable for ourselves. Even our supposedly realistic soap-operas virtually exclude smoking, swearing, and even political talk from their characters' lives. While there is no doubt that our screen media grossly over-represent the incidence of violent crime (because it fascinates many people), in some other respects they provide bland distortions of the real world.

It is quite evident that TV programming is still predominantly inspired by Reithian paternalism, with its aim of morally improving the viewer. For instance, occasional programmes which violate the message that 'crime does not pay' attract immediate political criticism. Erotic material openly aiming to give sexual stimulation can be seen late at nights on European satellite TV, yet is excluded from the main UK public channels on moral grounds. From a liberal perspective, a right to free expression and reception precisely implies that one tolerates the communication of messages that one morally disapproves of.

There is little threat to adult civil liberties in the present Amendment on classifying videotapes. However, the thinly concealed intent of conservative moralists like David

Alton MP and various pressure groups is to go much further down the road of censorious paternalism. That is one major reason why dangerous misconceptions about the inherently corrupting properties of media messages must be firmly countered.

* * * * *

FOOTNOTES

¹ E.Newson, 'Video violence and the protection of children'. Child Development Research Unit, University of Nottingham, March 1994. Note that this report was commissioned and distributed by David Alton MP, and withheld from academics like myself until after the relevant Commons debate led the government to act upon it.

² A.Hagell & T. Newburn, *Young Offenders and the Media: Viewing Habits and Preferences*. London: Policy Studies Institute, 1994. In contrast to this study, Newson and other 'anti-social effects' theorists rely mainly upon data from the USA, where many factors differ from the UK situation, or else they uncritically accept 'clinical' evidence from unsystematic psychiatric interviews.

³ Here governments and institutional forces are seriously at fault too. Funding and support are rarely adequate for the painstaking, intensive, long-term studies which could hope to settle the relative importance of various causal contributions to anti-social dispositions and actions. Pressures within the social scientific professions actively militate against research with substantial but only long-term payoffs. Just a tiny proportion of the massive sums spent on the criminal justice system could instead lead to confident answers eventually saving much of the cost of its work in mopping up the after-effects of crime.

⁴ See for instance M.Hewstone, *Causal Attribution: From Cognitive Processes to Collective Beliefs*. Oxford: Blackwells, 1989.

⁵ Many of the complexities are well covered in one of the more authoritative recent reviews of media effects studies: G.Cumberbatch & D.Howitt, *A Measure of Uncertainty: The Effects of the Mass Media*. London: Broadcasting Standards Council/John Libbey, 1989. This includes details of studies cited in this Memorandum, but not referenced in footnotes.

⁶ M.J.Boulton, 'Children's abilities to distinguish between playful and aggressive fighting: A developmental perspective'. *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, Vol.11, 1993, pp.249-263.

⁷ O.Wiegman, M.Kuttschreuter & B.Baarda, 'A longitudinal study of the effects of television viewing on aggressive and prosocial behaviours'. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, Vol.31, 1992, pp.147-164.

8 P.M. Greenfield, *Mind and Media: The Effects of Television, Computers and Video Games*. Glasgow: Fontana, 1989.

9 The judge's opinion that watching violent videos helped to corrupt the killers was contradicted by the police. They insisted there was no evidence that the boys did watch videos like *Child's Play* or copy sadistic film characters (*The Independent*, 2nd April 1994). For evidence on their backgrounds see D.J. Smith, *The Sleep of Reason*. London: Century, 1994.

10 S.M.Bailey, 'Fast forward to violence'. *Criminal Justice Matters*, No.11, Spring 1993, pp.6-7. My request for further clarification of her methods and findings has so far met with no response.