In a previous issue of the JMH (June 1994) we published an article by Elizabeth Newson which supported the view that violent videos can lead to violent actions. This is an important issue when considering the mental health of a society. In this issue Guy Cumberbatch presents a different perspective.

**Abstract**

Fears that mass media violence is harmful to children and encourages crime and violence can be traced back a century and a half. Each new medium has provided the focus for concerns that there has been a recent and unprecedented rise in juvenile crime and that this has been caused by a new medium which is unprecedented in its glorification of crime and violence. Such concerns are the basis of Newson's (1994) report but appear to be nothing more than speculation fuelled by the popular press.

**Political pawns**

The report by Elizabeth Newson (1994) Video violence and the protection of children represents something of a watershed in the long history of debates about media violence. It was produced at the request of David Alton MP to gain support for his
proposed legislation to restrict the availability of videos for sale or rental. Alton's concern was that the Video Recordings Act 1984 was inadequate and that young children were gaining access to videos more suited to older age groups. With the cross party support of one quarter of the MPs in the House, he introduced a new clause 42 to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill. This would have further restricted videos to exclude those judged to offer "inappropriate role models "to a child as well as any likely to cause "psychological damage".

The Home Secretary, Michael Howard, appeared unconvinced of the need for such ambiguous and potentially draconian legislation pointing out that the Video Recordings Act already allowed fines of up to pounds 20,000 to be imposed on anyone trading in videos which had not been classified by the British Board of Film Classification. Additionally a fine of pounds 5,000 was available to punish those who were tempted to supply children with videos classified as inappropriate for their age group.

David Alton's lobbying was to prove very effective in persuading the Home Secretary to change his mind. Alton published Newson's report on Good Friday and captured front page news in most of the national press. "'Naive' experts admit threat of violent videos" (lead story in The Daily Telegraph, April 1st 1994); "VIDIOTS! At last experts admit: Movie nasties DO kill (the Daily Mirror, April 1st 1994) was typical of the reporting. Doubtlessly the "endorsement" of Newson's report by twenty five "leading psychologists and paediatricians" helped in elevating the report to a major news item.

Michael Howard responded swiftly. The Daily Mail on April 2nd announced "Home Secretary will act to keep video nasties out of the home". By the time the Criminal Justice Bill came up for debate on April 12th, Alton's amendment had been adopted in essence by the Home Secretary in what was seen as a U turn by political commentators (eg "Howard retreats on 'video nasties' was the lead story in The Independent April 12th 1994). The Home Secretary in a new Clause 4A proposed various changes to strengthen the law on the classification and supply of video material. Sentences of up to two years imprisonment could be imposed on those supplying videos to under age children.

Additionally the clear intention of the clause was to create a new category of film unsuitable for home entertainment and to 'classify' videos more cautiously. To be effective this legislation will allow the reclassification of existing videos (25,000 titles are
in circulation) so that films currently subject to controversy such as Child's Play 3 which received an 18 age group classification could be withdrawn.

Considerable ambiguity still surrounds this legislation since it is very much in the hands of the British Board of Film Classification just how it is implemented. Moreover, the implications for terrestrial and satellite television remain unclear since they operate their own classification systems. Child's Play 3 for example has been shown twice on BSkyB's movie channel. This is one of the many practical problems with trying to legislate in this area. The growth of satellite channels, the easy availability of uncensored videos in France and Holland may conspire to create problems reminiscent of prohibition in the USA. Video recording, video copying and video production are now domestic activities posing special problems for policing. This would matter less if the threat posed by violent videos could be identified. In the mounting campaign against video violence the problem it represents has been assumed rather than demonstrated. The issue has taken on the characteristics of a modern mythology relying essentially on superstition for its credence.

It was because of the lack of tangible evidence in a climate of press hysteria and political lobbying that Newson's report was so influential. Experts now agreeing that they were wrong to underestimate the threat of violent videos can all too easily be read as 'experts studying the effects of violent videos have now found evidence'. Indeed one signatory to Newson's report encouraged this view:

"In the past many of us thought there could be a link but the evidence was not terribly convincing and not enough to make us question the freedom of an individual to have access to this material. The Bulger case made us think again". (Quoted in the Daily Mail April 2nd 1994)

Violent videos and violent children

Newson's report begins "Two year old James Bulger was brutally and sadistically murdered on 12 February 1993 by two 10 year old children". Harrowing details of the murder set the scene for a different explanation than that the children were simply 'evil freaks'. She argues " . . . already the most cursory reading of news since then suggests that it is not a 'one-off', concluding that what is now different is "the easy availability to children of gross images of violence on video". This section comprises one third of her report and seems to be based entirely on accounts in the popular press. Of course
readers of the report might reasonably assume that a professor of Child Psychology might be expected to know more about the cases described than the average citizen.

The attribution of motives such as 'sadistically', 'the expectation and satisfaction of deliberate and sustained violence'; the implied familiarity in the use of 'Jamie' (instead of the preferred family name 'James') provide an illusory independent verification of press speculation.

Press speculation on the influence of video violence has begun to bear more than a passing resemblance to a medieval witchhunt. Despite police evidence that there appeared to be no link with video violence in the James Bulger case, parallels with Child's Play 3 were fancifully drawn. On November 25th 1993 The Sun newspaper organised a public burning of the film. While Newson does not cite Child's Play in the context of the Bulger case, she later links it to a murder: "In England an adolescent girl was tortured by her 'friends' over days, using direct quotations from a horror video (Child's Play 3) as part of her torment".

However, just as with the Bulger murder, police evidence that videos were not implicated is ignored by Newson as it was in the considerable press speculation about the Capper case. The 'link' in the murder of Suzanne Capper was not to a film but to the lyrics of a heavy metal band whose music had been recorded off a local radio station. This police evidence seems to have been as much as a surprise to the Home Affairs Committee (22nd June 1994) as it was to Newson as the following exchange reveals:

Professor Newson: "The Suzanne Capper case is another example of a very explicit imitation of video and the use of a video and that was Child's Play 3."

Sir Ivan Lawrence (chair): "We were told this morning that that had been looked into and that the Earl Ferrers in the House of Lords has denied - I have not got the evidence we heard this morning - that there was a basis in the Capper case of Child's Play 3".

Professor Newson: "The soundtrack was actually played".

Sir Ivan Lawrence (chair): "Can I read from an analysis of this from Mr Ferman of the British Board of Film Classification of course. What was played to her was a rock version of the music from the first Child's Play film recorded on Manchester Piccadilly Pop Radio Station. That is all-music, not video?"
Professor Newson: "In that case it depends. That has been widely misreported, I think in that case".

Sir Ivan Lawrence (chair):"Yes, it has". Professor Newson: "That would depend then on whether that particular girl had seen that film and whether she was able to identify the film from the music".

Sir Ivan Lawrence (chair):"There were no videos in the houses that this young lady was held in, apparently. That was the evidence. However let us not argue about it".

(Home Affairs Committee. 1994 Fourth Report.P12)

Of course the inevitable nature of evidence in such cases makes proving that someone did not see a video an almost impossible one. However the alacrity with which speculation that someone might have seen a video and that this might have caused a crime has never been tempered with a later apology when the facts do not support the case. Claims that there exists the smoking gun of evidence against videos are common but have always rested on speculation.

Perhaps the best known case should be that of Michael Ryan who shot dead sixteen people including his mother in Hungerford (on August 19th 1987) before killing himself. Reports that he carried a 'Kalashnikov' assault rifle seem to have provided sufficient grounds for a link to be made with the 'Rambo' film First Blood. It was a blame game played by all the media even the 'quality' press. For example The Daily Telegraph (August 21st 1987) interleaved a full account of the events in Hungerford with the plot of First Blood. Rambo became Ryan. Ryan was Rambo. Despite the impressive imagination and agility required to produce such a convincing parallel: "The truth was a lot less colourful. For it is simply not known whether Ryan ever saw any of the Sylvester Stallone films including First Blood". (Josephs, 1993,P165)

Then, as now, demands were made for a crackdown on video violence. New legislation was introduced to control semiautomatic firearms the most obvious victim of which was the sporting self-loading shotgun. Ironically Ryan killed more people with a pistol than he did with the rifle (Josephs, 1993).

Prompted by the speculation that Ryan's rampage could have been due to a film, in 1988 the BBC flagship current affairs programme Panorama investigated the evidence
for links between video and crime. Six cases were found where a clear link had been claimed in press coverage. None of these cases stood up to even cursory examination by Kate Adie and her team of investigators.

Some consideration must be given to the view that even in the absence of proof, if there exists suspicion of cause, then society must be prudent. However if video violence were capable of exciting the excesses attributed to it, then it is quite puzzling that no clear cases have emerged. When the Director of the British Board of Film Classification was cross examined by the Home Affairs Committee on this point he replied:

"I do not know of particular cases in Britain where somebody has imitated a video and gone out and actually committed a serious crime as a result of what they have seen". (Home Affairs Committee. Fourth Report. 1994. P2)

The puzzle in this is that audiences for video violence run to many millions of individuals per annum in Britain. ITV audiences for a James Bond film on one night of transmission alone have reached eighteen million. Last year in 1993 there were just short of one hundred million cinema attendances in the UK plus seventy seven million video rentals. With such massive exposure we might reasonably expect that a few cases would arise every year of what James Ferman described as "the eggshell skull problem" where a tomato dropping on the unfortunate individual's head might prove lethal.

In the case of video violence we might well expect that the British public would contain a sufficient number of disturbed individuals to produce a reliable pattern of well documented cases where such people were influenced by a film to reenact its plot. Ideally of course the same film would be implicated in a number of cases thus allowing more confident attributions of cause to the film rather than to individual pathology.

In this context the two separate murders of Bulger and Capper both apparently linked to the same film title was unique. But in neither case was the evidence anything more than speculation.

**Violent children**

The first one third of Newson's report uses newspaper accounts of violent juvenile crime to establish the premise that we are faced with a new problem which needs to be
explained. If children are more callous and cruel then, Newson argues, this must be due to something else that is different.

Exceptional though it may be when two ten year olds are tried for murder it is quite misleading to suggest the Bulger murder was qualitatively different from what has gone before. In his account of the case (The Sleep of Reason 1994), David Smith searched newspaper files for ‘similar’ incidents and found thirty three reports of such cases over the last century and a half. This may well be an underestimate but serves to remind us that such events are not new and should not merit new explanations.

There is little doubt that concerns about juvenile crime provide a convenient focus for the media. However, newspaper headlines serve more to fuel fears than inform us of the state of our children. Criminal propensity is more reliably gleaned from the Home Office Criminal Statistics. Here data do not support concerns that things are getting worse. The number of children found guilty or cautioned has declined by over a third in the last decade (from 214,000 in 1981 to 140,000 in 1992). Of course some committed pessimists might read these figures as confirmation that the criminal justice system is going soft on children. However the number of children subject to criminal supervision orders have increased by 25% from 1985 to 1992.

Consistently, acquisitive crimes predominate in juvenile offending with less than one in ten (8%) involving violence against the person. Quite probably UK society is more violent than a decade ago though evidence on this is controversial. The 1992 British Crime Survey of victims notes that there has been a 15% increase over the last decade compared with recorded offences of violence which have doubled (Mayhew, Maung & Mirrlees-Black, 1993). The researchers attribute a large part of this discrepancy to increased police activity over violence. This no doubt reflects public concerns and is of course quite central to the broader issues under discussion here. However in the context of national figures on violence, the recorded increase in violence against the person committed by juveniles over the last decade - at 13% - is modest and aggravated by girls increasingly taking up traditionally male pursuits which sadly includes aggression.

Facts and figures all too rarely resolve disputes. Belief systems have their own protection. The psychologic of attitudes and beliefs must remain one of the most unexplored territories of the psychological sciences. Why and how can people so
fundamentally disagree over a few obvious facts? The premise of Newson's argument that children are now becoming unlike how we were as children seems a timeless concern of some adults quite untouched by the more obvious reality that adults simply get older and lose touch with what childhood is and probably always was. The most impressively documented account of this perspective is that offered by Geoffrey Pearson in his book: Hooligan: A history of respectable fears (Pearson, 1983). Although some generations are inevitably missing from archives it seems clear that contemporary concerns that children are getting out of hand have been shared by adults for the last two thousand years. Quite probably every generation since has thought that things were getting worse and that children were a new problem in the perceived escalation of crime and violence.

**Media violence**

Popular culture seems to have been regularly blamed for society's ills. In the sixteenth century "popular songs too often presented criminals as heroes" (Burke, 1978). In 1776 Joseph Hanway suggested that debasing amusements and newspapers were among the causes of "the host of thieves which has of late years invaded us". By 1817 disorderly amusement houses were condemned for "that early depravity and extent of juvenile delinquency which every magistrate acknowledges to exist" (see Pearson, 1984). In the 1840's 'penny gaff' theatres were accused of encouraging immorality and imitative crime. The Sixth Report of Inspectors of Prisons dated 1841 pronounced "If they do not directly corrupt the mind, they tend to its vitiation, by familiarising it with scenes of grossness, crime and blood with a revolting coarseness" (Worsley, 1849). At the turn of the century The Times (September 26th 1898) asked "how far a music hall programme may be held to encourage lawlessness".

By 1905 Charles Russell did not need to ask whether theatres caused crime in Manchester's youth: "horrible murders and terrible tragedies were enacted before the footlights" leading to "so many instances of violence on the part of young men in the backstreets of the city".

Since comic books first appeared as 'penny dreadfuls' in the mid nineteenth century they have been a popular target for those anxious to explain the rise in crime. Greenwood (1869) offers the following reflection:
"Granted, my dear sir, that your Jack or my twelve year old Robert, have minds too pure either to seek after or to crave literature of this sort in question. But not infrequently it is found without asking. It is a contagious disease, just as typhus and the plague are contagious, and as everybody is aware, it needs not personal contact with a body stricken to convey either of these frightful maladies to the hale and hearty. A tainted scrap of rag has been known to spread plague and death throughout an entire village, just as a stray leaf of Panther Bill or Tyburn Tree may sow the seeds of immorality among as many boys as a town may produce."

A century later essentially the same concerns are being articulated about videos. In the intervening years each new medium: the cinema, the radio, Horror Comics in the 1950's, television, videogames has inherited the same legacy of anxieties that there is an unprecedented rise in crime and this must be laid at the door of the mass media. Each new medium has been accused of obsession with crime and violence and of plumbing new depths of depravity and gore.

The apparent timelessness of such concerns should alert us to the possibility that maybe things have not changed much. As with concerns about crime, speculation that things have got much worse in the mass media is no more than speculation based on exceptional cases. Unfortunately, there has been a dearth of systematic analyses of media content so that it is difficult to say to what extent films have changed. However we do know that most people (eight out of ten) believe that television violence continues to get worse and some critics believe this strongly but that data from systematic monitoring fails to support such concerns. Indeed the two largest studies carried out actually revealed a decline in television violence between the early 1970's and 1986 (Cumberbatch, 1987). Since then the pattern has remained fairly stable. Interestingly, given the particular anxieties about television in Britain, the terrestrial channels at least seem to portray approximately half the amount of violence shown in most other counties studied: the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Germany, Holland and France (Cumberbatch et al., 1988).

While violent acts can be counted, judging the seriousness or gratuity of violence is subjective. Thus one particular difficulty in dealing with Newson's report lies in the decontextualised use of a portmanteau word like violence. This is not something which can be very meaningfully discussed as a separate entity since its form and function depend on a film's genre and narrative. There is no doubt that the massacre on the
Odessa Steps in The Battleship Potempkin (1925) remains one of the most 'violent' in the history of the cinema. A one minute scene stretches to five through the use of frenzied cutting. A young mother watches in horror as her baby is carded in its runaway pram bouncing down the steps of carnage. Should we worry that children might be harmed by such scenes and did children ever imitate this? Of course the film has regularly been hailed as the best film ever made but this is really quite irrelevant to the Alton/Newson lobby.

Contemporaneous judgements on films cannot easily predict their lasting cultural worth. As adolescents many signatories to Newson's report were very nearly denied the opportunity to see films such as Rock around the Clock (1956); Rebel without a Cause (1955) and The Wild One (1954) because these films were accused of causing juvenile crime. How dangerous it was when the hoodlum motorcyclist (Marlon Brando) was asked "What are you rebelling against?" and replied "What've you got?".

These films may appear 'tame' by today's standards but this is not to suggest that films made in the 1990's are any worse than those made in other decades. They are simply made differently and it is this challenge to do things differently that inspires film makers as much as rebellious youth.

One genre that seems to most offend the sensibilities of David Alton and Elizabeth Newson is that of horror. Although clearly not to everyone's taste the horror genre contributed generously to the early cinema with such themes as Frankenstein (first made in 1908) and Dracula. Some classics from the 1930's can still chill the viewer as effectively as modern productions and no doubt cause a sleepless night. The whole point of such films is that they make people frightened. They do not make people frightening (Barker, 1984). Their lasting appeal perhaps especially to children is exactly for this reason - recognised in the publicity for the 1931 Universal Pictures production of Frankenstein: "To have seen it is to wear the badge of courage". Gory violence can be part of the appeal as it was in the development of the Grand Guignol theatre in the generation before film. However violence is - as Quentin Tarantino commented on his earlier film Reservoir Dogs - just one colour to work with. His most recent film Pulp Fiction is considerably less violent, though thanks to lobbyists and new legislation this may, like the earlier film, be refused a video classification.
There seems little doubt that banned films do not disappear, despite penalties of up to pounds 20,000 already available to the courts. However the extent of this problem is unknown. Perceptions by some parents and teachers that there is an extensive problem have not been substantiated in any reliable way. The term video nasty seems generously used to refer to any violent or horror film. This is unfortunate since the term took on a precise definition over a decade ago to refer to films which had not been passed by the BBFC. The more notorious of these include Driller Killer, I Spit on your Grave and Nightmares in a Damaged Brain. It was the existence of such films in the early 1980's that led to the introduction of the Video Recordings Act (1984). Then, as now, lobbyists argued that children needed protection and enlisted the support of some academics to prove the case. This was achieved most effectively by a report of a survey: Video violence and children which like Newson's captured the lead story in most newspapers when released in November 1983. Headlines shouted "Half of children see film nasties" (the Daily Mail), "The rape of childrens' minds" and so on. Of course the legislation passed safely through the Commons.

As researchers interested in the field we were puzzled at these survey results since it had proved difficult to obtain many of the titles and so we began to suspect the methodology. On obtaining the original questionnaire used in schools it became clear how such an inflated figure could have been produced. The questionnaire was far longer than desirable and the key questions came on the last five pages where 113 video titles were listed. At the beginning of this section children were asked if they had seen a film listed to rate it on a three point scale. This scale read "great", "just all right" and "awful". At the top of each page above each scale was a cartoon face corresponding to the judgement. Unfortunately instructions even if initially understood can quickly become forgotten and our hypothesis was that children might well have begun to rate the films even if they hadn't seen them. To test this, the original questionnaire was faithfully reproduced but with some non-existent titles substituted for the video nasties. These fictitious titles such as "Blood on the teeth of the vampire" were checked in specialist film guides to ensure that no similar sounding film existed. The results from five classes of eleven year olds indicated that two thirds (68%) of them had seen films which do not exist!

Interviews with children revealed two boys who had seen a fair number of 18 rated films. Both were quite serious film fans. The one when discussing American Werewolf in London commented how disappointing the special effects were compared with Michael
Jackson's Thriller "considering that they had the same technical crew you know - John Landis."

Others who have probed children on their relationship with television and film tend to share the view put forward here that what children bring to the viewing situation is far more important than the content of what they watch. There is a great mismatch between how children relate to film and television and how Newson believes they might. (See Buckingham, 1993 for a useful review of such child centred research).

**Researching the effects of media violence**

Violence has probably been the most researched topic in the vast literature on mass communications. Any simple conclusions to this literature are inevitably misleading but, as suggested here, seem quite irrelevant to why some people have always believed that popular culture does us harm. It seems most unlikely that anyone reading the accounts of research endeavours with an open mind could come round to believing that the signposts point in the same direction of likely harm. Unfortunately we do not have open minds about popular culture since centuries of collective wisdom and 'common sense' tell us otherwise. Moreover it is true and well publicised - because at any level it's a good story - that most hypotheses about potentially harmful processes of media violence receive some empirical support. But the inconsistencies and contradictions are very troublesome (See Burne, 1993 for a brief account of these).

As Newson/Alton argue the issues, the problem of media violence remains whatever the evidence. If children have nightmares it's a problem and if they don't it's even worse. If a violent offender has not seen a film, he could have. If imitation is shown to be a red herring then it's the brutalising effects of other films. If a study of delinquents fails to reveal prurient interest in video nasties then presumably the damage is already done. (See Hagell and Newburn, 1994)

Rather than become bogged down in literature critically reviewed elsewhere (eg Brody, 1978; Cumberbatch & Howitt, 1989), would it not be more economical to conclude that media violence is essentially an irrelevant issue in understanding why some people are so nasty and most of the rest of us are not nicer?

At the end of the day, when we consider this whole business perhaps the main issue that we should reflect on is that of our professional responsibilities. Newson's report
was launched on a Good Friday when it could be predicted that unless dissenting reviewers wished to be proactive their voices would not be heard. Dissenting voices who disagree with almost every word of Newson's report rarely care anywhere near as passionately as she apparently does. Precious few of the video nasties I have seen have been enjoyable for me. However precious few have deserved the stigmatisation given. For example one 'banned' genuine video nasty: I Spit on your Grave pilloried for its very graphic depiction of rape was first issued under the title The Day of the Woman and is a serious exploration of the issue (See Starr, 1984)

Of course, unless you are happy with the idea of someone paying pounds 20,000 for your privilege to see this film and following the new legislation an additional penalty of two years prison sentence, you won't know what you've missed.

Experts are very treasured by journalists. They are a cheap source of news. The problem professional bodies must address is their exploitation by pressure groups where professional expertise is eclipsed by pressure group interest. The most serious indictment of Newson's report is not that she is uninformed in this debate or that she holds her beliefs so sincerely. It is simply that she asserts at the end of her report that "I have limited myself to my own professional specialism". Arguably there is nothing in Newson's report to support this assertion. The failure to distinguish this and the failure to discriminate between sources of knowledge may be far more damaging in the long run than any video nasty.

What about the future? Concerns about the role of the mass media seem unlikely to diminish as new technologies such as virtual reality and information super highways become added to the liturgy of modern evils from which children 'need' protection. However, while Britain is already arguably the most regulated of developed countries, the availability of unregulated material is growing rapidly especially via satellite transmission.

If video violence is perceived as a problem then of course perhaps something should be done. However, Newson's report and Alton's legislation seem essentially irrelevant to the issues they purport to address. We could try to stem the imagined tide of video violence sweeping the country causing a perceived 'unprecedented' crime problem. Or we could press for media studies to be added to the national curriculum and hope to produce a media literate generation. This might not lead to the achievement of Reithian
dreams but at least might eventually lead to a more informed debate about media violence.

And, who knows, maybe a media literate society might produce some academics who can understand the mass media for what it is. Something, not to be trusted as a window on the world, but an endless source of entertainment.

Reprints from Dr. Guy Cumberbatch, Applied Psychology, Aston University, Birmingham B4 7ET.

References


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By GUY CUMBERBATCH

Applied Psychology, Aston University, Birmingham B4 7ET

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