

## **The Media and Violence: Needed - a Paradigm for Public Policy**

by Peter Horsfield

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In the past two years there have been three major investigations into violence in Australian society. Each of them are examining or have examined, to different extents, the role played by violence on the media.

On 11th January, 1988 the Social Development Committee of the Victorian Parliament was requested by the Governor in Council "to inquire into, consider and report to Parliament on strategies to deal with community violence." Among its brief was the request to examine "the portrayal of violent behaviour in the mass media and entertainment industries, and to review existing codes of practice for the reporting of violent crime in the mass media." The Committee recently completed its enquiry, producing three reports, the first of which led to the establishment in July 1989 of a Community Council on Violence within the Ministry for Police and Emergency Services. Other recommendations are still before the Parliament.

On 22nd August 1988, the Federal Minister for Transport and Communications directed the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal to hold an enquiry into "the portrayal, presentation and reporting of violence on television" and "the most appropriate method of ensuring that proper consideration is given by licensees to the suitability ..... of violent material in television programming." Submissions were invited and research commissioned to determine community attitudes and perceptions of violence shown on television. The Tribunal Committee was holding public conferences during August and September 1989 to gain further public response to specific proposals gained from the submissions and research.

On 16th October 1988, the Federal Minister for Justice announced the establishment of a National Committee on Violence, a joint Commonwealth-State initiative with a wide-ranging brief "to inquire into and report on violent crime and violence generally in Australian society (and) recommend preventive strategies." The Committee is expected to make its final report to the Prime Minister and the Premiers by the end of 1989.

The catalyst for this plethora of enquiries was the growing community concern that violence in Australia was on the increase, stimulated particularly by the multiple murders in Hoddle Street and Queen Street in Victoria in late 1987 and the proximate massacre in Hungerford in the U.K. The general community shock that followed these events found expression in a strong suspicion that the media, particularly the television and video industry, contributed significantly to these and other expressions of social violence through the heavily violent nature of much of their news and entertainment programming. Each of the enquiries was set up soon after these events.

These enquiries will need to address the theoretical question of the role played by video and television portrayals of violence in community violence and criminal behaviour? Even though this has been one of the most heavily studied topics in communication research internationally for more than fifty years, no conclusive answer has been found and no clear policy direction for

dealing with it has been forthcoming. While community passion and suspicion following traumatic events may be an effective motivator for getting enquiries started, passion and suspicion alone have been found to be ineffectual in sustaining the subsequent detailed re-examination and reformulation of complex social policy and commercial practice.

Once the passion dies down, however, thoughtful reflection alone indicates that the situation is not that simple.

First, while the media are highly visible social institutions and the frequent targets of community concern, it is apparent that they also are products of the society. They draw their symbols of violence -- and in the case of news their incidents of violence -- from within the host culture. Long before television and videos entered the scene Australia had a strong tradition of violence running through its history: from the European invasion and slaughter of aboriginal inhabitants two hundred years ago, through the treatment of convicts, its ANZAC traditions and readiness to fight other people's wars, and parts of its sporting tradition.

Second, while censorship of the media appears to be a desirable way to reduce the portrayal of violence, it is not an easy solution to implement. Advocating censorship as a solution ignores the complexity of associated issues of freedom of speech and questions of imposition of one particular set of moral values in a socially and morally pluralistic society.

Third, applying simple legislative solutions to complex social issues also seems attractive, but ignores other relevant factors such as the role of the family and parental supervision, the place of education, and broader social determinants such as employment and access to social and economic opportunity.

For this reason enquiries into media violence have a poor historical record. In the U.S.A., for example, there have been the 1928 National Committee for the Study of Social Values in Motion Pictures, the decade-long Senate hearings on the role of the media in juvenile delinquency in the 1950s, the 1968 National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, and the 1972 Surgeon-General's Scientific Advisory Committee's Report on Television and Social Behaviour. All invested significant resources into researching the relationship between different media and social violence. They all brought forth inconclusive findings, could find no sound and clear basis for legislative decision-making, and had little significant effect on industry practices. The continuous analysis of programme content by communication researchers such as George Gerbner shows that the levels of gratuitous violence in U.S. television are as high as ever.

What then should policy-makers do in response to genuine expressions of community concern? Are these enquiries destined to be merely band-aid measures, established so that governments of the day can be seen to be doing something and as an opportunity for concerned community groups, professionals and academics to let off some steam?

It is obvious that the media of communication have some role to play in the development and shape of a society's life and functioning, but how can that role be adequately conceptualised in order to formulate policy that protects the social fabric from abuses while enhancing positive aspects of the relationship?

One of the key factors in this is the conceptual model used in understanding the connection between media and society. A major problem is that the dominant models which have been used historically for evaluating the foundations for social policy are inadequate for handling the complexity of the situation. This is seen in two ways.

For example, the dominant model reflected in the society at large for understanding media effects is still the old one of imitation. Fed by success stories of advertising campaigns and occasional stories of individuals acting out bizarre incidents seen on television or in movies, a large part of the community believe that television and videos major effect on social behaviour is a direct one, whereby programme material is either directly imitated or directly undermines social morality. A model such as this may explain the widespread demand for action against the media following bizarre and traumatic events such as the Hoddle Street and Queen Street murders.

The problem is that while the imitation model may be useful and perhaps even accurate in particular individual situations, it is totally inadequate as a model for policy-formulation on a societal level. It is obvious that even in these extreme situations any particular medium is only one contributory factor and treating extremes as the norm is a totally inadequate basis for legislation.

The danger of resorting to the imitation model because of its aptness in an individual situation, is that when the complexities of the situation become apparent, and because no adequate alternative model for policy formulation has been developed, purposeful action is not possible.

While regulation of media content has not been as simplistic, historically policy-makers have suffered from similar inadequacies in conceptual formulations. Policy-making in media regulation, particularly in the U.S. and to a large extent also in Australia, proceeds generally by forming, or at least undergirding, political decisions on the same "objective" and "scientific" basis developed for less ambiguous areas such as public engineering, economics, and regulation of public safety. The assumption (and hope) has been that if the physical sciences could provide a clear picture of the universal and objective laws on which physical reality could be harnessed for economic benefit, then the same mathematical, quantitative methods could be used by the human and social sciences to discover the objective laws of human behaviour as a basis for social engineering and policy-making.

When faced with a substantial issue such as media and violence, therefore, the first step has been for policy-makers to try to establish a clear, empirical and "objective" body of "facts" as the basis for their decision-making. This approach to the issue of media and violence has been demonstrated historically to be inadequate, for a number of reasons.

The empirical method of sub-division, isolation and measurement of individual variables, while successful with some policy applications, has been found to be totally inadequate to handle the large number of complex and inter-related behavioural variables that are present in any communication situation. It is even less adequate to the task of enabling prediction of consequences as a basis for evaluating various policy options. The current state of ferment within communication research theory itself is an indication of the collapse of confidence in the

ability of adopted empirical methodologies alone to handle the complexities of the situation.

Looking primarily to models based on quantitative research methodologies to provide a clear direction for policy in regulating media and violence can also distract policy makers from coming to grips with other difficult but more important value questions that impinge on the issue of media and violence, such as the purpose of broadcasting, issues of ownership and control of media, the international context of Australian media, the dominant economic nature of most of Australia's social communications, the distinctive ways in which the media reproduce and reconstruct myths and symbols of violence from within the culture, and how audiences use and respond to media myths and symbols.

### **Needed: a new paradigm**

What is needed, therefore, is a new paradigm for understanding the relationship between media and society. It needs to be one that has sufficient breadth to integrate the many factors which affect the media within society, but which also has sufficient definition to enable intentional and constructive policy development to meet specific problems. The paradigm needs also to be able to integrate the many insights which have come through the vast amount of empirical effects research without becoming tied to the limited societal perspectives of that research model.

One way to proceed may be to begin to reconceptualise the relationship between media and society on an environmental model rather than an individual causative one. Within such a paradigm we would begin to analyse an issue such as media and violence in terms of its effects first on the broader symbolic environment that is needed for constructive social life, rather than just on isolated and selected individual actions. Some parallels may be drawn.

Regulation of the natural environment does not proceed on the assumption that humans are solely responsible for the hazards of life. We are not solely responsible for the hazards we encounter in life; our environment contains many naturally occurring hazards to which we constantly adjust. Similarly most poisons and diseases occur naturally. But the intentional gathering of humans into concentrated communities produces distinctive characteristics which have severe implications for what is assumed to be a desirable natural environment.

Similarly, seeing the mass media in relation to our common symbolic environment would not assume that the mass media alone are responsible for violence within society. But it does provide a basis for considering the implications for our shared symbolic environment of the particular intentional concentrations of selected images resulting from the media's distinctive economic, technological, and structural characteristics.

Nor does environmental law always operate on the basis of direct individual effect. If I dump hazardous material into the ocean I am accountable, not because there will be people who can be proven to have directly ingested it, but because in doing so I am a contributor to a broader class of action which has been deemed to have an undesirable anti-social effect. This broader class of action even allows for individual differences in vulnerability: some people may be affected whereas others will have greater resistance. Care of the environment even allows for aesthetics, such as the preservation of particular trees or prohibitions against dropping innocuous rubbish simply because it looks bad.

To reconceive the issue of media and violence in such terms may be a more productive paradigm for development of future directions in research and discussion. Such a paradigm could incorporate the extensive insights gained through empirical research while avoiding the futility of trying to prove sole cause. It also could provide a means whereby other influential factors could be investigated and addressed, such as differences in the social and economic purposes of broadcasting, the social sources of violence and how media portrayals interact with those causes, how the restraints and traditions of media production cause the media to pick up particular cultural images while ignoring others, and how particular audiences respond to and use media images.

"Forms of violence have been a perennial dimension of human and social existence. Even when it does not erupt in war, riots or criminal aggression, it is lurking beneath the surface in personal and national ambitions, in social injustice and in myriad individual or social frustration. Much of human history is the attempt to come to grips with this fact of human history. Inevitably the 'media', whether in epic folktale, Greek or Shakespearean drama or TV, take up that dark side of human potential which is violence."(1)

To try to suppress this aspect of human experience by censoring it could have quite undesirable consequences. The media in this sense mirror what is in our humanity. For that reason it is inadequate to deal with the issue of media and violence within a framework that deals with the media in isolation and by attempting to prove media culpability. The attempt has failed in the past, and to try to do so again merely detracts from the important task of constructing a more adequate alternative by which to conceive the issue.

That does not mean ignoring the role of the media. While the media mirror what is in our humanity, they are in a quite distinctive position of power within the society and while they should not be blamed for the whole picture, they can rightly be held to account for the important role they play within the whole. The questions that need to be asked, therefore, are in what ways do the media mirror reality, what factors influence their particular view, and what are the consequences of that shaping?

The difficulty of the paradigm, of course, is that it lifts media policy out of a mere bureaucratic administration into a broader dimension of cultural debate: what sort of symbolic environment do we have, what sort of symbolic environment do we want, and what is the role of the media in our collective effort to deal with our human potential for violence?

For this reason, policy-making in relation to our shared symbolic environment is much more complex than policy-making in relation to the natural environment. Our inherited natural environment contains its own norms. While there will be ongoing debate about which natural processes are essential and desirable, which species need to be saved from extinction, and where do we draw the line between environmental preservation and economic development, at least we have a pre-existing natural world and natural processes as a departure point for discussion.

Our symbolic environment, on the other hand, is largely socially constructed. In a pluralistic society such as ours, therefore, finding a common consensus of desirable qualities necessary in human society as a beginning point for discussion about the role the media play in contributing

to, or detracting from such shared qualities, is awfully elusive.

If we do not seek such a social basis for policy-making, however, we run the risk of subordinating the needs of people in society to the demands of the economic market place, and of restricting implementation of the aspirations of people to the limitations of the arbitrary scientific instruments we have invented to attempt to measure them.

If we reconceive the problem in such a symbolic environmental way, it opens a number of research possibilities.

- What sort of symbolic environment do we have?
- How do people respond to the environment?
- What sort of society do people want?
- What role do the media play in the maintenance and development of our shared symbolic environment?
- In what ways do the ownership and institutional factors of the media shape their social functioning?
- What particular meaning do the various media place on portrayals of violence (tragedy vs entertainment)? What are the factors influencing this interpretation, and to what extent should those factors be affirmed, counteracted or disciplined?
- How much do they focus on violence and what are the factors involved in this focus?
- What mechanisms are necessary to maintain dialogue between the economic and institutional dynamics of media industries and their social role?
- What mechanisms exist and are necessary to maintain dialogue between the media as institutions and the social aspirations and communication needs of the community?

Following the address of Tribunal Chairman Deirdre O'Connor to the Australian Institute of Criminology's Conference on Violence held in Canberra in October 1989, the three commercial networks advised the Tribunal they were ready to produce an industry code to control television violence. (2) Prior to that conference, I attended one of the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal hearings into Media and Violence in Melbourne in mid-1989. Scattered among the audience of the surprisingly well-attended hearing were representatives from the three television networks.

It struck me as unfortunate that it took an expensive series of hearings following a number of unfortunate social traumas for such combined action to take place. The media industry produce programs under significant pressures: from their *raison d'être* as commercial institutions, the interweaving nature of media organisation and functioning, their traditions of production, international networking, and social alternatives. This needs to be recognised. Yet, more than most other commercial and social institutions, because of the centrality of communication to the maintenance and functioning of a society, the media have a vital social role to play. While recognising the reality of these other pressures, that vital social role cannot be ignored nor left unattended.

NOTES

(1) Robert A. White and John Sheehan, "A new approach to research on media violence," *Communication Research Trends*, Vol 5 (1984), No 4, p.8.

(2) "Tribunal offered industry-wide TV violence code," *Abtee*, 23/10/89, p.3.