



# SEX, VIOLENCE, MONEY, AND MEDIA



## FACTS TO REMEMBER:

- Six companies own ninety percent of the media.
- The universal appeal of sex makes it an effective hook.
- Violence in the media isn't inherently bad.
- It's important to analyze how messages in the media affect us.

## The Perfect Storm: Sex, Violence, and Money

We've covered these topics in previous chapters, but since these topics are the engines that run the media machine, I thought they deserved a little more attention. Sex and violence are the

## MASTER THE MEDIA

hooks used by the huge media companies to get and keep our attention, and they can also be the same hooks that keep certain news stories circulating.

If one were to create a news story guaranteed to get attention, the recipe would require a celebrity, some violence, perhaps some sexual aspects, and a load of money. Think of Ray Rice's elevator fight with his then-fiancée Janay Palmer. The story controlled news cycles for weeks. Why? Was it the celebrity? The violence and drama? The domestic violence angle? Or because the NFL generates over \$1 billion in sponsorship revenue annually?

Once we are aware of how the media and news use the tools of sex and violence to grab our attention, it's easier to see "behind the curtain" and not get persuaded.

**"People's misery becoming entertainment, that's what's dangerous. And that seems to be the place we're going. I worry about television."—George Clooney**

## Sex

Hello to those of you who turned to this chapter first because of the saucy title! And *thank you* for proving the point that sex has a universal appeal. Sexual content—pervasive in movies, music videos, television shows, and music lyrics—easily draws attention to any media production. That's why it's impossible to effectively analyze media without evaluating its use of sexual content.

Faced with competition from television, movies were the first to dabble in controversial topics. Fighting for ticket sales, movie

## SEX, VIOLENCE, MONEY AND MEDIA

producers told stories that television wouldn't touch. For example, the 1962 film *Lothia* about a middle-aged man's infatuation with a young girl, and 1971's *The Last Picture Show*, which included adultery, promiscuity, and alcoholism, both featured content that would have never been allowed on television. In fact, television in the 1950s was so *clean* that, even though they were married in real life, Ricky and Lucy Ricardo's characters in the classic series *I Love Lucy* slept in separate beds. Additionally, the show never mentioned the word "pregnant" even though Lucy, along with her character, truly was. Not until 1964 were married couples from *The Munsters* and *Bewitched* allowed to be shown in the same bed, but nothing beyond talking was allowed. (Perhaps, though, since it was Herman Munster, we should be grateful for that discretion.)

Fast-forward to the 1970s, and Maude Findlay, the namesake character of *Maude*, could not only say the word "pregnant," but she could also say "abortion"—and have one too. Programs continued to become more risqué, as shows like *The Love Boat* and *Dallas* included some sexual content in their themes. Once cable channels got involved, sexual portrayals on television took off and never looked back. From 1998 to 2005, sex scenes on television doubled. On average, music videos contain ninety-three sexual situations per hour, including eleven portraying intercourse and oral sex.

What's interesting is that, in 2005, only fifteen percent of the sexy scenes on television contained any mention of sexual responsibility or recourse. The media portrays sex as easy, normal, and without consequences. So, although sexually suggestive themes and imagery can't be avoided when consuming media, if one were to depend on the media for sex education, his education would be sorely lacking.

## MASTER THE MEDIA

We can't blame media producers for including sexy material. Their job, after all, is to make money for the stockholders. Nevertheless, many would say they have an obligation to show sexual situations responsibly. And while I agree media creators should show some restraint, it's naïve and idealistic to think they will do anything other than push the limits of society's moral standards. With all the media we consume, producers have to shock or thrill us to get attention; sex is frequently the bait that gets our attention.

**"Mario will never start shooting hookers!"  
—George Harrison, Nintendo Co., Ltd.**

Television, movie, and music producers aren't the ones using risqué imagery to turn our heads. Ever since Brooke Shields announced in 1980 that nothing came between her and her Calvins, Calvin Klein has been pushing the sexual boundaries in advertisements. But it's brilliant! Even if a Calvin Klein ad campaign is criticized and, better still, there is a threat of a boycott, Calvin Klein gets *free publicity* in the news. Even if an ad is pulled after negative publicity, it will live forever on the Web, creating more notoriety for the company. Truly, there is no such thing as bad publicity.

In my opinion, the pressure students feel to be sexually active correlates to the amount of media they consume. When I ask students to name one virgin on any television show currently in production, they're hard pressed for an answer. Lisa Simpson always gets mentioned, but after that, silence. The lack of virginity on television, at least when it's not the butt of a joke, normalizes sexual behavior and makes students think "everyone is doing it" when, in reality, teen sexual activity is down.<sup>2</sup>

## SEX, VIOLENCE, MONEY, AND MEDIA

The universal appeal of sex means it translates well into other cultures, although scenes may not have the same impact with every audience. Content that is considered sexually explicit in one country might seem tame to another. As a result, identifying what constitutes sexual activity within programs or ads is difficult. In fact, simply defining sexually explicit material is extremely challenging. Helping students become aware of how their perceptions about sex are being shaped by the media will empower them to step back. Perhaps, they'll realize all that heavy breathing isn't love or real life but an act to keep them watching and buying what advertisers are selling.

### Violence

Google the terms *media* and *violence* and you get nearly eighty-seven million results. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what should be done about violence in the media. From a media literacy perspective, though, we can analyze violence in the media for its purpose, value (or lack thereof), and effect.

Comic books were once criticized as being too violent. A 1940 editorial in the *Chicago Daily News* claimed that "the effects of these pulp-paper nightmares is that of a violent stimulant... their hypodermic injection of sex and murder make the child impatient with better, though quieter, stories."<sup>3</sup> The editorial, written by Sterling North, was later picked up by dozens of newspapers around the country.

Criticizing violent media content did not begin with mass media. In fact, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* was criticized as "unspeakable cheapness" and one letter to the editor in London wrote, "The effect

## MASTER THE MEDIA

which the writings of Beethoven have had on the art must, I fear, be considered injurious."<sup>4</sup> Musician Gustav Leonhardt even considered it "vulgarity."<sup>5</sup>

### "TV is the single most significant factor contributing to violence in America."

—Ted Turner

Criticism of violence in electronic content then should come as no surprise. In 1950, Senator Ed Johnson criticized radio crime dramas and asked to include articles about them in the Congressional Record.<sup>6</sup> The FCC Chairman at the time, Wayne Coy, similarly criticized television after a survey found over one hundred murders and ten thefts portrayed on television in one week.<sup>7</sup> Considering the number of those portrayals has multiplied exponentially, can you imagine what Chairman Coy would think today?

Blaming electronic media for violence in society is easy and common. Simply examine the media coverage of any school shooting, and one of the first things discussed about the shooter is usually what movies he watched and what video games he played. But objectively analyzing violence in the media requires a thoughtful approach because violence itself is subjective. The word could be used in reference to physical violence, sexual violence, gun violence, emotional violence, or verbal or psychological violence. Our different definitions and views on what constitutes violence make evaluating it problematic.

To further confuse things, not all violence shown in media serves the same purpose. For example, sometimes witnessing violence in media prompts us to become emotionally involved or even compelled to action. A movie about child abuse could increase

## SEX, VIOLENCE, MONEY AND MEDIA

awareness of the issue. Violent or disturbing news clips from a natural disaster might be difficult to watch, but it could actually lead people to donate money or resources. An argument could be made that violence is sometimes necessary to tell a story. My mother, for example, thought *Apocalypse Now* was too violent and the language was offensive, but how could one make a movie about the war in Vietnam without including violence? *Saving Private Ryan* was also criticized for its brutal, graphic scenes of the D-Day landings, but how could Stephen Spielberg have told the story of the Allied invasion of Normandy without violence? Similarly, would a film about slavery that contained no violence whatsoever be realistic or socially responsible? In some cases, violence is a necessary part of the story.

Gratuitous violence, however, is different in that its only purpose is to keep consumers engaged or entertained. Violent acts are sometimes simply thrown into a media presentation without being a necessary part of the story. *South Park* parodies this by killing the Kenny character during every episode, only to have him reappear in the next episode to be killed again. No one makes fun of non-essential violence better than Itchy and Scratchy from *The Simpsons*. Sometimes the violence is so absurd it seems satirical. *The Bunnyman Massacre*, a 2014 movie, is described this way: "When a maniac in a rabbit suit embarks on a killing spree, a storekeeper sells the victims as beef jerky."<sup>8</sup> When I heard about *The Bunnyman Massacre*, I mistakenly assumed the horror film was a spoof that might have aired on Comedy Central. I was wrong.

Like sex, producers include violence in media presentations for economic reasons; it translates well into other languages. Think of this way: which type of conflict resolution would be best received

## MASTER THE MEDIA

in other countries—a detailed, dialogue-driven conversation, or a car chase complete with a gun battle? Explosions beat dialogue at the box office every time, in almost every culture. Violence means big profits for the huge multinational conglomerates that own and create our media. For years, critics have accused media makers of catering to the lowest common denominator when it comes to content. When it comes to violence, it seems the critics are correct.

Unlike the story of our friend in the bunny suit, in some cases, the violence isn't a part of any scripted drama or program. *America's Funniest Home Videos*, for example, is really nothing more than a collection of slapstick and people falling down. Additionally, a sad undertone, thoughtfully considered by *Los Angeles Times* writer Howard Rosenberg, accompanies this type of content: "What does matter is the show's undertone of sadism when it comes to children. Some comedy. What's funny about a toddler banging into a wall? Then another toddler doing the same thing? Then another? Then another?"<sup>9</sup>

This successful formula, though, exists in many programs, all the way back to Wile E. Coyote and the Road Runner. MTV's *Ridiculousness* clips make a viewer wonder if anyone was seriously injured, but we're never told because that would ruin the joke, and ABC's *Wipeout* even adds goofy sound effects to add to the fall's *punchline*. Is it any wonder people think we may be desensitized to violence? When it becomes something we laugh at, I think the answer is a definite yes.

Physician Mike Oppenheim actually thinks television isn't violent enough. In a famous essay he wrote for *TV Guide* in 1984, he states that viewers were surprised at how President Reagan reacted

## SEX, VIOLENCE, MONEY, AND MEDIA

during his assassination attempt in 1981 because, unlike shootings portrayed in the media, he didn't immediately stumble and collapse after being shot. Oppenheim claims the media portrays violence as neat and clean, when, in reality, it is anything but. "Serious, real-life violence is dirty, painful, bloody, and disgusting...we don't need to clean up violence," he notes. "It's already too antiseptic."<sup>10</sup> In Oppenheim's view, realistic depictions of violence might act as a deterrent. Unfortunately, society's response is impossible to predict. Blaming media violence for violence in society implies it did not exist before the mass media, but any basic knowledge of human history would disprove that. So there must be other variables leading to violence besides media consumption. After all, my classrooms have been filled with students who've consumed violent media for years, and, *so far*, they've been pretty well adjusted kids.

### Video Game Violence

Video games tend to be a hot button issue when I talk about media violence to parent groups. And, yes, there are definitely some video games I would never buy for my sons. But for the most part, I'd prefer they play video games than watch television. If that sounds crazy, let me explain.

Watching TV is a passive experience. Someone else has written the story; there's no interaction with the media or other people. Television programs require nothing except my children's eyeballs. They are simply consumers of the product. Modern video games, however, offer a completely different experience. In many cases, my boys play in a "map" or online world they have personally created by planning, collaborating, and prioritizing—often with friends or

## MASTER THE MEDIA

cousins hundreds of miles away. They are solving puzzles, exploring, and are in charge of the narrative. The video game experience is not linear—it's different each time it's played. And I can't deny I get a rush of excitement when I see my boys working together to kill Nazis.

**“If a teenager can't discern right from wrong, I'm pretty confident it has little to do with whether he or she watches Buffy or plays violent video games.”**

**—Sarah Michelle Gellar**

When we talk about video games in class, my students invariably share how they learned about the pioneers from playing *Oregon Trail* or learned about taxes and governing from *SimCity*. We might not realize how much our students and kids are learning when they are relaxed and “playing.” My youngest built an entire sorting system, complete with conveyor belts, in *MinerCraft*—after he learned to cross-pollinate trees using the same game. Anyone who claims video games are a waste of time is making a gross generalization. Nevertheless, there are some games I will never buy my sons, and I hope they never buy for themselves. Many of them involve gratuitous misogyny, sadism, prostitution, and crime. So although I'm generally a fan of video games, some of them do not pass the “mom test.”

We can't blame violence in the media for all of society's ills, but we do need to be aware of its presence and purpose. Likewise, as responsible consumers, we must ask why gratuitous violence exists in media programs and what effect it has on each of us.

## SEX, VIOLENCE, MONEY AND MEDIA

- Does it desensitize us?
- Do depictions of violence normalize it?
- Do producers of media have an obligation to show violence responsibly?

While we can't control media creators or outlaw the messages they broadcast, we can teach the students—as recipients of these messages—to be aware of how the media affects their thinking and behavior.

### Concentration of Ownership

In 1983, fifty companies owned ninety percent of the media. Today, only six companies own nearly ninety percent of the media products we consume. Make no mistake, media is a business. Whether privately held or publicly traded, these profit-based companies peddle whatever messages reap the most revenue. While they might also do some charity work, these business leaders and stockholders do not have our best interests as consumers, voters, or humans at heart. Their primary concern is the bottom line.

As the owner of YouTube and its own sites and services, Google is on its way to joining the big six: Walt Disney, General Electric, NewsCorp, Time Warner, CBS, and Viacom. And since Google censors information in other countries to appease less democratic governments, we would be wise to ask if Google censors for our government as well.

The companies that own our media have the power to influence—even control—our culture by what they cover and (perhaps, even more importantly) what they do not. Since we know that media will

## MASTER THE MEDIA

only tell us stories that make them money, isn't it wise to stop and wonder what stories we are NOT being told?

*The Columbia Journalism Review keeps an outstanding and current list called Who Owns What that breaks down the ownership of every media outlet in the country. For those wanting to be media literate, it's a bookmark worth saving.*



## QR CODES

No Long-term Link between  
Violence in the Media and Real-life  
Violence



Research Study: Video Games  
Don't Make Us Violent



Infographic: The Illusion of Choice



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Dale Kunkel, Ph.D., Keren Eyal, Ph.D., Keli Finnerty, Erica Biely, and Edward Donnerstein, Ph.D. "Sex on TV" A Kaiser Family Foundation Report, November 2005, <https://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/sex-on-tv-4-full-report.pdf>, 21.

<sup>2</sup> "Youth Risk Behaviors Surveillance." (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Colville, "The Comic Book Villain, Dr. Fredric Wertham, M.D.," *Seduction of the Innocents and the Attack on Comic Books*, accessed June 13, 2015, [http://www.psu.edu/dept/mart/0\\_110/mart/0/cmbk4cca.html](http://www.psu.edu/dept/mart/0_110/mart/0/cmbk4cca.html).

<sup>4</sup> Peter McNab, "The IEA Italia Event," *Nine Points Magazine* (December 19, 2013): n.p., <http://www.ninepointsmagazine.org/the-ia-italia-event/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Gustav Leonhardt," *The Economist*, January 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Senator Ed Johnson, speaking in 81st Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record*, (March 14, 1950): S 3285.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3479-3480.

<sup>8</sup> "The Bunnyman Massacre," DIRECTV, accessed June 13, 2015, <https://www.directv.com/movies/The-Bunnyman-Massacre-aEjHdIzWZ4YVWVOXDXZlNsk09wUT09>.

<sup>9</sup> Howard Rosenberg, "The Sadness Behind 'Funniest Home Videos,'" *The Los Angeles Times* (Los Angeles), March 21, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Oppenheim, "TV Isn't Violent Enough," *TV Guide*, February 11, 1984.