

Violence is a Product

James A. Herrick

The violent behavior of many American teen-age males raises a variety of perplexing questions. The most pressing is this: What causes the school shootings, the date rape, the racial and homosexual assaults? Clearly, any single answer to even this one question fails to acknowledge the causality issue's complexity. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why we condone the violent content of television programs, movies, music, and video games in light of recent staggering events.

There can be no question but that exposure to media violence is causally related to aggression by teens and younger children. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that more than a thousand studies now link exposure to media portrayals of violence and aggressive behavior—a thousand studies. Still, the leaders of the entertainment industry argue that two fundamental American values—freed speech and free markets—exempt them from responsibility in these matters.

Perhaps a solution to this failure of moral responsibility of the part of media moguls is simpler than we might at first think. It may be that what is required is a simple act of redefinition. Rather than categorizing violent content in the various media as “entertainment” or “artistic expression” or “free speech,” we should understand media violence for what it is—a highly profitable and heavily marketed commodity. That is, violence in the mass media is best understood as a product, one produced by a segment of the entertainment industry and pitched to a target demographic of 14 to 24 year old males. Moreover, this product—media violence—is successfully sold using reliable, time-tested marketing techniques. And, it is important to note that media violence is a very profitable product for the companies that produce it. The combined gross sales of violent video games, music lyrics, movies, and the advertising revenues of violent television programs would easily reach tens of billions of dollars annually.

If media violence is a product, what is its value to consumers? Apparently media violence is valued by its largely male consumers for its capacity to provide a psychological thrill and the attending physical sensations. In this way media violence is not unlike other products valued for their capacity to produce mental and physical thrills. Examples include roller coaster rides, tickets to a professional sporting event, addictive drugs, and perhaps guns themselves. But, media violence is unlike these other products in various important ways as well. It is unlike roller coasters and professional sporting events in that it apparently has a demonstrably negative effect on its consumers, and one that affects other people—recall the thousand studies linking media violence to aggressive behavior. And, it is unlike addictive drugs in that it is perfectly legal and even, so its producers claim, constitutionally protected. However, this is probably due to our tendency to see it as something other than a product.

Now, the point of classifying media violence as a product is this: products can be taxed according to their costs to society. Cigarettes, for instance, are heavily taxed in part because we know that the medical costs associated with cigarette smoking are enormous. Large trucks are

assessed large tax levies because we know that, in spite of their great usefulness, they damage the roads they use and pollute the air. So, why not calculate the costs associated with the sale of media violence, and then tax the producing industries accordingly?

The costs of media violence might include counseling and medical treatment associated with domestic violence, staff time for controlling aggressive behavior in schools (and the cost of lost education for other students), litigation associated with school shootings (and trauma counseling for high school students who have seen friends shot), and perhaps even the costs arising from incidental acts of daily violence such as accidents caused by road rage. By the time we have added up all the costs, a reasonable tax could be proposed—say, 30% of the total cost of violence to society. This figure allows for more than 70% of the causality for violence to be attributed to other sources. This 30% could be spread across all forms of violent media products produced in a year.

Call it the V-tax. Let's suppose the V-tax is assessed based on the likelihood that a product will encourage violent behavior in its consumers. Thus, the V-tax might add \$10 to the cost of a video game, \$5 to the cost of a movie ticket, and perhaps \$7 to the cost of a violent rap CD. What would be the effects of such a tax? First, revenues collected could be applied to helping victims of violence. This would be a tremendous benefit to medical and counseling institutions already strapped for resources. Second, consumers would purchase less violence, the V-tax thus directly helping to solve the problem of violent behavior. Thus, the simple act of redefining media violence as a product could take us a long way toward solving our growing violence problem.

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