

APRIL 2008

**MEDIA
VIOLENCE**

JAMES GLEDHILL



DEBATING MATTERS
**TOPIC
GUIDES**

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MOTION:

**“PEOPLE NEED
PROTECTING FROM
VIOLENT LYRICS,
FILMS AND
VIDEO GAMES”**

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KEY TERMS

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INTRODUCTION

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What impact does media violence have on the way people act? Does exposure to violent music lyrics, films and video games lead to aggressive and violent behaviour? It's a debate that won't go away, as the reaction [Ref: [BBC News](#)] to the launch of Grand Theft Auto IV shows. And it's a particular concern of politicians, as in the wake of headlines about gun and knife crime both Gordon Brown [Ref: [Sun](#)] and David Cameron [Ref: [Independent](#)] referred to violent video games in calling for greater social responsibility. While it may be too simplistic to suggest a straightforward copycat effect linking what people see or hear to what they do, many scientific studies have raised concerns about the effects of media violence, particularly on vulnerable and impressionable young people. Such evidence forms the basis of arguments for censorship, with measures ranging from bans on violent material, to the cutting of scenes from films and the classification of films and video games by age limits. The game Manhunt 2 has been banned [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and the government's Byron review recommended that more games be rated. Campaigners for freedom of expression oppose such restriction and dispute the claim that media has a direct effect on behaviour. They argue that it's not the job of the authorities to decide what's in people's own good. Are some people susceptible to the influence of violent media and in need of protection? Or can we depend upon people being able to differentiate between fiction and reality, so that they should be left to decide for themselves what music they listen to, films they watch or video games they play?



Does media violence cause real violence?

New forms of media have always aroused concern. The arrival of video in the 1980s led to the 'video nasties' row and new censorship laws [Ref: [Screen Online](#)]. Such reactions have been seen as moral panics, but there have been prominent cases in which violent media have been blamed for tragic events. After the murder of James Bulger in 1993 it was pointed out in court that the ten-year-old killers had been watching violent videos such as Childs Play 3. After the 1999 Columbine High School massacre in the US it was claimed that the teenage killers were influenced by the game Doom, and video games again came under scrutiny after the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. Grand Theft Auto previously caused a sex controversy [Ref: [BBC News](#)] and along with Manhunt has been linked with murders. In addition, rap music has been alleged to glamorise gun culture [Ref: [Observer](#)], and Jamaican dancehall music – dubbed 'murder music' by its critics – has been accused of inciting homophobic violence.

What does the science say?

This is hotly disputed. There is little consensus in the scientific literature about whether violent media leads to aggressive or violent behaviour. In those studies that claim there is a link, there is no agreement as to exactly how it works. Part of the problem is agreeing on a definition of what constitutes media violence. Then there's the problem of disentangling the influence of media from that of other factors. Underlying the debate are different media effects theories that take different views on the way people engage with media. At one end of the scale, the so-called 'hypodermic needle' model portrays audiences as passive

and easily influenced by the media. The media directly 'injects' its message into the audience. This has been challenged by new audience theories such as 'reception analysis', which focus on the way audiences construct their own meanings out of the media, rather than simply accepting the meanings they're given.

Are video games like Grand Theft Auto a major threat to the moral health of society?

This was the charge levelled by Hillary Clinton in 2005, when she suggested that violence, and in particular the demeaning portrayal of women, has a desensitising effect [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Exposure to violence in the media, it is argued, makes people less able to empathise with the suffering of others, and therefore more likely to act violently towards them. This could be especially pronounced in the case of video games in which players take the role of an aggressor. But the authors of the book Grand Theft Childhood disagree, suggesting that many children use games to vent anger and relieve stress. Sceptics say blaming media violence is simplistic and ignores complicated social factors. The results of experiments should be treated with caution since people behave differently in the laboratory, freed from normal restrictions on behaviour, than in real life.

Can violent song lyrics increase aggression or even incite murder?

Some evidence has linked violent lyrics with aggressive behaviour [Ref: [New Scientist](#)]. Gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell has led a campaign to stop 'murder music', arguing that some lyrics 'encourage, reinforce and legitimise' homophobic violence. He argues for a restriction on free expression in order



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to prevent the incitement of violence against lesbians and gay men. Opponents of restrictions argue that this stretches the definition of incitement beyond credible limits, as there is no clear causal link between listening to such music and acting violently. Much of the debate revolves around how we should treat things that some people find offensive: as a potential danger to society, or as something to be tolerated in the name of free expression.



ESSENTIAL READING

Shoot first, ask questions later?

Darren Waters *BBC News* 23 August 2006

Head to head

Marc Saltzman *1Up* 2 June 2005

FOR

Video games ratings face overhaul

BBC News 27 March 2008

Don't shoot: Why video games really are linked to violence

Amanda Schaffer *Slate* 27 April 2007

Call to cut media violence

mediawatch-uk 23 February 2007

Does game violence make teens aggressive?

Kristin Kalning *MSNBC* 8 December 2006

When it's not OK to say anything

Peter Tatchell *Guardian Unlimited* 7 July 2006

AGAINST

I'm game for Grand Theft Auto. You should be too

Catherine Bennett *Observer* 4 May 2008

Grand Theft Childhood and the case against media sensationalism

Adam LaMosca *The Escapist* 29 April 2008

Classifying the classifiers

Darren Waters *BBC News* 27 March 2008

The new 'free speech' apartheid

Brendan O'Neill *Guardian Unlimited* 6 July 2006

Violence on the brain

Graham Barnfield *spiked* 17 January 2006

IN DEPTH

The myth of media violence

Andrew O'Hehir *Salon* 17 March 2005

Senator Clinton's speech to Kaiser Family Foundation

Hillary Clinton *The Free Radical* 8 March 2005

Policy statement on media violence

American Academy of Paediatrics 1 November 2001

Ten things that are wrong with the 'effects' model

David Gauntlett *NewMediaStudies.com* 1 January 1999

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BACKGROUNDEERS

It's just a game, says man behind Grand Theft Auto

Mark Macaskill interviews Leslie Benzies *The Sunday Times* 27 April 2009

Is technology ruining children?

John Cornwell interviews Susan Greenfield *The Sunday Times* 27 April 2008

Byron Review: the industry responds

Keith Stuart *Guardian* 27 March 2008

Byron Review released

Aleks Krotoski *Guardian* 27 March 2008

Are children safe in the digital world?

BBC News Have Your Say 27 March 2008

At a glance: the Byron Review

BBC News 27 March 2008

Safer children in a digital world: the report of the Byron Review

Tania Byron *Department for Children, Schools and Families* 27 March 2008

Is it wrong to blame hip hop?

Chris Summers *BBC News* 13 November 2007

State of play: Violence and video games

Margaret Robertson *BBC News* 13 August 2007

Whatever happened to the 'video nasties' row?

Iain Hollingshead *Guardian* 15 October 2005

My life of porn and violence

Mark Kermode *Observer* 19 September 2004

Explained: censorship in the UK

Sean Clarke *Guardian* 13 March 2002

Freedom of expression in the arts and entertainment

American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) 27 February 2002

News you can use on kids and violence

Diana Zuckerman *National Research Centre for Women and Families*

Grand Theft Childhood

Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl Olson

Media violence fact sheet

The Free Expression Policy Project

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ORGANISATIONS

British Board of Film Classification (BBFC)

Campaign for Press and Broadcasting Freedom

Mothers Against Videogame Addiction and Violence (MAVAV)

Office of Communications (Ofcom)

Pan European Game Information (PEGI)

Video Game Voters Network



IN THE NEWS

Man stabbed in queue for Grand Theft Auto IV
The Times 30 April 2008

Grand Theft Auto receives acclaim
BBC News 29 April 2008

'Grand Theft Auto' still driving critics nuts
Chicago Tribune 27 April 2008

Bid to censor violent films fails
BBC News 29 February 2008

Manhunt 2 release saga continues
BBC News 25 January 2008

Gordon Brown's blitz on blades
The Sun 14 January 2008

Cameron wants crackdown on violent films to curb crime
The Independent 29 August 2007

Victory for gay rights campaign as reggae star agrees to ditch homophobic lyrics
The Guardian 23 July 2007

German gamers face jail for acts of virtual violence
The Guardian 12 December 2006

Violent video games 'desensitise' players
Daily Mail 17 August 2006

PM under pressure on video games
BBC News 25 January 2006

Judge blocks law on violent games
BBC News 23 December 2005

Violent video games alter brain's response to violence
NewScientist.com 12 December 2005

No strong link seen between violent video games and aggression
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign 9 August 2005

Sex controversy over GTA game
BBC News 11 July 2005

Hillary opens up morality war on violent video games
The Sunday Times 27 March 2005

Can a video game lead to murder?
CBS News 6 March 2005

Violent song lyrics increase aggression
New Scientist 4 May 2003

Police hit at rappers for making guns glamorous
Observer 5 January 2003

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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS
THINKING DEEPLY
ABOUT...SOCIAL
ISSUES”**

IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA

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