Article

Critically examining media violence by applying relevant theoretical perspectives and critically evaluating its origins, impacts, and penological policies

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Abstract

Media violence has presented itself as an emergent zemiological harm on society. Present in many ways, media violence appears in films, music, games, news and most recently, social media. The development of contemporary methods of media from their origins highlight the addiction to violence society has acquired and the neoliberalist ideals in soliciting violent content in response. From films and music, these have often influenced gang culture, desensitising viewers, and listeners to violence. Moreover, games have progressively gotten more realistic and as evident in the Columbine High School Massacre of 1999, seem to influence the killers to commit horrendous murders, though is often debated amongst researchers for its harmful impact. News sources sometimes highlight violent content to large audiences, which globalises tolerance for violence but can also perpetuate false narratives as evident after 9/11, when the Muslim community was forced into an environment of strain. Lastly, social media has cosmopolitanised the globe into a heavily government-regulated digital world on the abundance of easily accessible violent content. Now, more than ever, the importance for violent media regulation is needed. From PEGI ratings to governing bodies that restrict hateful content, a new issue has emerged - human rights abuses with freedom of speech. The path for media regulation is underwhelming thus the educating of the public is necessary for the future.

Keywords: Media Violence, Games, Films, Social Media, News, Music, Cosmopolitanism, Neoliberalism, Zemiology, Criminology

Since the formation of criminology in the late 18th century on the back of earlier crime detection and regulatory systems such as the watchmen and the parish whereby crime was an 'infraction of the criminal law' (Newburn, 2017: 8), criminology has been notoriously centred around violent physical acts committed by criminals. However, the development of zemiology in the 1990s alongside the widespread availability of the internet has allowed for astonishing progress in

technological development with electronic mail and entertainment (Sowmya and Roja, 2017) also contributing to the pervasive influence of media and exposure to violent content as online harms, presenting challenges with regulation. This essay will first focus on the origins of violent media, collaborating the instantiation of the internet and early research such as the Bobo Doll experiment. Then, violent media will be explored in the entertainment industry involving films and music and how they manipulate people's tolerance to gore and promote gang violence. More concerningly, the influence of media in games has fuelled the committing of ghastly crimes as will be explored in the Columbine High School Massacre of 1999, assessing how the popular video game, DOOM, facilitated the motivations of the killers due to the 'immersion' and 'realistic graphics' (Lavender, 2007: 1), resulting in the demonisation of gamers worldwide. Additionally, news sources will be explored and their influence on spreading violent media to the public. The September 11th attacks will be sourced analysing how the media is used as a catalyst for information but also violent media exposure and the detrimental impacts with PTSD and moral panics involving Muslim individuals that came from its documentation. Moreover, the internet has played a significant role in cosmopolitanising the globe with social media but has enabled the sharing of violent content online causing vast social harm displacement. These methods of media violence will be collectively analysed to recommend regulatory advancements given the future progression of media.

Throughout the article, there will be a constant critique of the socio-economic environment as well as neoliberalist political ideals. Lastly, there will be a consensus drawn based on national and international organisational and governmental policy in response to media violence, considering the issues with regulating these types of media. Then a conclusion will be made recommending policy additions and improvements concerning the severity of violent harm currently and the outlook for the future with the emergence of more realistic films and games and the evolution of screen culture.

When analysing violent media, it is important to understand what the terms mean. Violence is constructed as 'the intentional use of physical force or power …resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation' by the World Health Organisation (2004), a global organisation that categorises the harms of violence. Media can be social media, newspapers, radio broadcasts, videos, games, films, or pictures. The intersection of these terms catalyses the displacement of online harms consciously or subconsciously onto groups of individuals. To contextualise violent media, the Bobo Doll was a psychological experiment done in the 1960s whereby an adult would enter a room with a child present and start punching a doll (Bandura and Walters, 1963). After regular exposure to the aggressive behaviour, the child would mimic the same behaviour, acting as the basis for media violence's newly found zemiological interest. Around the

time of this experiment, it was considered the golden age of theory where criminological thought began to branch into new avenues of thinking, seeing the growth of hippieism and the idealist paradigm of radical criminology. Prior to this, original harsh criminological punishment methods evident from the Bloody Code were reflected in early research with Classicism which emerged alongside the technological advancements of the Industrial Revolution. From classical retributivist 'eye for an eye' to positivist utilitarianism, these early approaches did not consider the individual nor were the punishments equivalent to the crimes. The militaristic development of ARPANET in 1969 and the globalised Internet in 1983 emerged a new dichotomy in that the Internet can be suitable for crime prevention but also as a function of criminal activity. Radical criminological developments and opposing areas of thought during a period of industrial conflict were critiquing administrative criminology for its expensive punishment methods and ignorance of crimes of the powerful. Post-Thatcherite consensus transpired a reappraisal of crime prevention with feminist and radical criminology and the study of harm in zemiology. This contrasting paradigm which emerged in the 1990s alongside the switch from individualised justice to left-realist social and relational justice posits a multitude of 'economic, physical, financial, emotional, and psychological' harms (Tombs, 2018: 4-15), critiquing administrative criminology's neglectful attitude to harm and striving to detach it from creating legislation in emphasising the addressing of structural harms relating to violent media. Such analysis by Pearce (1973) highlights that 'the legal structure would help rather than hinder the actions of these powerful men', presenting an issue when considering the neoliberal connotations embedded into contemporary society regarding the switch from traditional methods of media to purchasable and advertisable media whereby organisations care more about profits than the potential harms dispersed. Additionally, in the societal switch from liberalism in the lessening of state control by prioritising individual rights and freedoms to authoritarianism with greater advocation for state control, it is important to punish the newfound harm with greater regulatory and surveillance systems. However, neoliberalist thought in the 1980s conveyed that 'winning at any cost becomes the primary objective' (Davies and Gane, 2021) highlighting the societal dichotomised debate of media safety whereby too much control stifles innovation whereas not enough control results in exploitation, especially by organisations that profit from media.

Media violence can come in a myriad of ways and one of the most marketed is the film and entertainment industry. Early criminological work by Bandura, which expanded upon the psychological research of the Bobo Doll, involved the concept of Social Learning Theory which perceives that observation, imitation, and modelling influence individualised learning (Bandura and Walters, 1977) which has been adapted into criminological explanations that crime is learned by

criminogenic relations. Alternatively, a concept such as the Hypodermic Needle posited that audiences passively accept mediated messages injected into them via the mass media, believing that violent behaviour in films causes anti-social, criminal behaviour in real life (Finklea, 2017) aligning with biological frameworks of behaviourism, cognitivism, and constructivism that were typical in the 1920s. From traditional theatrical and cinematographic arts to the first silent films throughout the 20th century, the visual experience was pivotal for audience engagement. However, the abolition of the Hays Code in the United States invoked that 'the technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation' (Milne, 2019). Alongside political unrest in the 1960s, this allowed for newer violent films to emerge such as The Texas Chain Saw Massacre (1974) which used imagination, quick cuts, and fake utensils to create an engaging and gory experience. Forwarding five decades, shockumentaries displaying terrorist content were newly accessible with the marketing of television and emerging films such as "Gorenography" in 2021 displaying the sociological want for violent content aided by technological advancements in Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI), formulating the concern that films have gotten too real. Some studies highlight that 'PTSD symptoms' and 'physiological reactivity to movie violence' are growing concerns however, more addictive watchers aim to seek violent content, additionally highlighting the need for more research on the effects of violent media on routine consumers (Mrug et al., 2015: 7).

But a more concerning product of film media is its interception and fuelling of gang culture. In the United States, examples such as "Scarface" in 1983 and "New Jack City" in 1991 received backlash due to the 'apparent violent aftermath these movies had on real-life gang activity' highlighting the widespread harm of publishing media which can be interpreted as opposing to what was intended (Przemieniecki, 2005: 42). Contemporary music such as rap and drill music in the United Kingdom have echoed this sediment, being synonymous with connotations of gang culture, being blamed by police, politicians, and the media for fuelling a surge in violent crime in London (BBC News, 2018). Overall, the entertainment industry has solicited an engaged audience that enjoys the thrill of violence and fear, though as argued by Presdee (2000) the commodification of crime enables the consumption of criminal acts and behaviour as pleasure, highlighting the corrosive nature of neoliberalist cultural values aimed at profiting from violence addiction, portraying gang violence to impressionable young audiences, harming their development. Beck's (1998: 259) work with risk societies highlights that as knowledge and technology improve 'we are left behind panting in ignorance …unable to understand or control the machines we depend on'. This collates the ideas of which media is harmful but regulating its effect is uncompromisable due

to the individualised nature of tolerance to violence, thus it leaves the responsibility to the individual.

There is also contention in research in assessing if the game industry is harmful towards players' sensitisation and aggression. Early board games such as chess in the 16th century and digital games such as Pacman and Space Invaders in the 1980s highlight the innocent nature of games as a means of entertainment. However, as technology has developed alongside the film industry, more action-based and militaristic narrative-driven games have been created. The psychological and sociological impact that games have on society has been of concern with conducted experiments determining that short-term exposure to video game violence increases aggressive behaviour (Rodgers, 2014) to which most documented results return inconclusive. However, the Columbine High School Massacre of 1999 contests this whereby two shooters entered a school and 'murdered 12 students and a teacher and wounded 23 others before shooting themselves' (Radford, 2000) with the suspicion that they were influenced by the video game DOOM, which has been previously 'licensed by the US military to train soldiers to kill' (Ibid.) highlighting the governmental intent to utilise games as a means of desensitisation. Despite the impact games had on behaviour at the time being unknown, it sparked up the zemiological research of violence depicted in games with some researchers believing games promote long-term 'aggression-related scripts' (Ibid.). A commonly analysed game for its desensitisation is the Call of Duty series. The player is often employed in combat grounds whereby soldiers are rewarded for killing the opposition, multiplied if they hit a headshot, demonstrating the conjuring of violence (Mukherjee and Pitchford, 2010). The press and political figures have historically involved themselves with the demonisation of gamers with Hillary Clinton labelling gaming as the 'silent epidemic of media desensitization' (Perry, 2005) and news articles warning that violent video games may be more harmful than violent television or films due to their interactive nature (BBC News, 2000). Alternatively, a spokesperson for the British Psychological Society argues that there is a world of difference between gaming and shooting classmates in a college (Radford, 2000). Moreover, extremely interactive games such as the billion-dollar installations of the Grand Theft Auto series and the Red Dead Redemption series by Rockstar highlight the development of video game graphics over time and the extremely inappropriate and offensive acts such as gambling, sex scenes and NPC torture. This desensitisation to life because of the engagement with violence in games, as Atkinson and Rodgers (2016) argue is reflective of the nature of the capitalistic, systemically violent outside world, following a left realist mindset. It cannot be overstated that games are becoming more engaging as evidenced by the capital market of being £3.86 billion, more than double its value in 2007 (BBC News, 2019) due to the globalisation of the internet and the COVID-19 pandemic, making it

greater than that of the film industry and music industry combined. This highlights the contentions with gaming and its inconclusive production of long-term psychological harm and trauma, though gaming companies will not deviate from creating games in high demand which perforates that the industry is in a limbo stage of social acceptability. In addition, more recent developments as of 2023 highlight that a new game engine, Unreal Engine 5, can produce graphics that are undistinguishable from real life as present in a beta game preview of "Unrecord". This, in collateral with the development of Virtual Reality that immerses the player in actively pursuing violent actions, demonstrates the need for greater regulation of the gaming industry. More research is needed to define if gaming can solicit aggressive tendencies long-term, and if it does, should games be banned by organisations or the government, or should the responsibility be left to the individual and parental figures to manage the content they are consuming? After all, there are other methods of violent media which are more influential in the daily lives of the public that are heavily overlooked.

Another relevant area of media violence is the type infused by corporations that are supposed to deliver the news to society. However, the existence of political and newsworthy bias within the news on multiple levels can cause violence in catastrophic ways. The most prominent historical misuse of news media was used in Nazi Germany with the publication of far-right 'propaganda influence' to legitimise genocide and manufacture consent in the 1940s (Zimmermann, 2006: 441). This collaboration with powerful elitists highlights the risk to the population who are injected with disinformation by the news believing false narratives and catalysing violence. Fast forwarding to the application of news media in contemporary society, the September 11th terrorist attacks were documented by the media live for the public to witness. Not only is this bleed-through of violence in the news as a widely accessible source through television fuelling the disbursement of emotional harm, but it also spreads the marginalisation of the Muslim community.

Firstly, it is evident that the news has been indirectly causing psychological harm displayed through post-traumatic stress symptoms and anxiety in a longitudinal study conducted by Silver et al. (2002: 1240) with nearly two-thirds of the sample reporting fears of future terrorism two months after the attacks, all but 6% of the sample having watched some news media about the tragedy afterwards. Secondly, the news coverage stigmatised and sensationalised Muslims, labelling them all as being 'terrorist,' 'extremist' and 'militant' (Wood, 2008) and forming an Islamophobic moral panic at the time. According to labelling theory, the act of labelling an individual acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the individual conforms to their label due to the sociological pressure endured onto them, which in this scenario, constructs Muslims as folk devils and perpetuates a

societal moral panic surrounding them (Cohen, 1972). Therefore, not only has the coverage of the tragedy been harmful to the viewers but it has solicited the societal demonisation of Muslims, generating emotional harm for them also. Most notably, the increase of arrests of individuals with Asian ethnic appearance increased by 36% taking the number to its highest since the tragedy, undoubtedly creating an environment of strain (Mohammed, 2021). This perpetuates the corrupt nature of the news in shaping the public's perception of real-world violence and the power that news media has in forging violence due to "newsworthiness." The news media is often influenced by factors such as 'drama,' 'immediacy,' 'celebrities,' 'sex' and especially 'violence' due to their high click rate from the public's addiction to shocking stories as 'a fundamental rupture in the social order' (Greer, 2007). This influence is also affected by the government's political stance, ignoring the harm caused by constant exposure to violent news, heightening fear, and anxiety, and conversely, the media may downplay or overlook the crimes of the powerful.

However, it is also evident that reporting on public disputes and trends is incredibly dangerous with the widespread usage of phones to get the latest news information forging today's golden age of conspiracies. For example, the World Health Organisation (2020) described the overabundance of false or misleading information on COVID-19 as a new form of "infodemic" influenced by news and social media in creating 'sadness', 'fear' and 'anxiety'. Although the right to freedom of information is upheld, the widespread silencing of harmful conspiracies is more valuable for public safety and the NHS. Overall, the news is not as neutral as what is made out. From systemic violence to the violent imagery inserting itself into every household, it is evident the potential risk to society these "credible" sources have due to the uncompromisable amount of harm that can be conjured. However, the paradigmatic shift from traditional news sources formulating societal attitudes to the emergence of social media provides an even larger problem to solve.

In contemporary society, phones are intuitive and engrained into the lives of billions of people across the globe, forming a cosmopolitan society whereby the transition 'from a nation-state definition of society and politics to a cosmopolitan outlook' (Beck, 2016) has allowed a more interconnected network of communication – but also suffering. This transition to a mobilised society has provided disadvantages coinciding with "screen culture" whereby individuals are addicted to their screens. With the introduction of modern media forms such as Twitter, YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, content visible on these apps promotes the engagement of users and creators alike, thus it is inevitable that this will be taken to the extreme. Social trends and challenges such as the "One Chip Challenge" have led to the death of those who have attempted it (Richardson, 2023) to "Snapchat Dysmorphia" with the social media application Snapchat

enhancing the negative self-perceptions and self-esteem of users to get plastic surgery mimicking the filters provided by the app (Ramphul and Mejias, 2018). Consequently, social media is powerful in channelling physical harm globally but also in that individuals become 'temporarily suspended from normative sociality and thus enabling permission to engage in otherwise transgressive experience,' as posed by Atkinson and Rodgers' (2016) "cultural zones of exception" theory to explain the link between contemporary media and violent tendencies. Evident in the emergence of meme culture online has devolved media sites into racist and homophobic joke pots of hatred. This has often been interpreted by organisations such as the police implementing "copoganda" used to 'promote, endorse and glorify police work and to justify, excuse and legitimate police malpractice and illegal activity' (Drake et al., 2023: 8) from the transition to social media to sensationalise the mugshots of suspects (Northumbria Police, 2023), forever defaming those accused and demonstrating the invisible systemic violence ongoing. In addition, there has been an increase in terrorist-related and violent content that is released online.

Media violence has 'increased the risk of arguments and fights at school,' also contributing to '20-25% of cases of serious youth violence' from watching distressing content (Social Finance, 2021: 46) leading to a society that is fuelled by anti-social media. The terrorist attacks in 2017 highlight the obsession between war violence and online hate speech microaggressions against Muslims (Williams *et al.*, 2020), demonising an entire religious group on the front of racist opinions published across social media. Wood (2017: 3) highlights a concerning point regarding the interaction between 'online activity and a site's personalisation algorithms', named "Algorithmic Deviancy Amplification" whereby the content promotes or condones illicit acts. With limited control over the content that appears on social media, kids can be recommended right-extremist podcasts that contribute to a toxic online environment or violent imagery enduring 're-traumatisation,' feeding the 'trauma loop' (Social Finance, 2021: 39). A few concerns arise regarding this: the commercialisation of advertisements to satisfy society's contemporary model of neoliberalist gain, the subliminal and unethical controlling of society by recommending content that suits the organisations' agenda, and the surveillance of watch history in breaching the users' privacy. All these issues harm society whereby the possession of social media omnipotence is treacherous and is only going to get greater with artificial intelligence improvements. Plus, the systemic regulation of the content being pushed to its viewers highlights the need to regulate social media's power over its users however it is a difficult challenge to solve since too much regulation equates to decreased creativity, constrictions on freedom of speech and increased control.

When considering the instantiation of new ways of media violence harm, it is important to also consider the national and international policies and regulations to combat the harm

displacement. Firstly, the international application of the Human Rights Act (1998) via the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) is often concerned when regulating the consumption of media in breaching the right to freedom from harm and its influence on shaping societal perceptions and behaviours. The National Online Safety Bill, which was renamed from the Online Harms Bill, potentially conveying that online activities are not "harmful," was released consolidating that a 'higher standard of protection is provided for children than for adults' when browsing online (Online Safety Act, 2023). However, an issue arises whereby it enforces that social media companies be legally responsible for keeping young people safe online by enforcing age limits and age-checking measures (Ibid.) whereby the content could be subjectively removed for its violence. Not only does this initiate the issue of social control by companies in power over freedom of speech (Human Rights Act, 1998) but it is also combated by users manipulating the age settings on their accounts.

However, the issue lies deeper than the media whereby society has founded a social factory on the internet that wants attention. China's online platforms 'proactively monitor, filter and remove content' reflecting stricter regulation and limiting freedom of expression whereas the United States pursues that 'most speech, including hateful and violent speech, is protected' under the First Amendment allowing social media violence (Apillalamarri and Stanley, 2021). Thus, the increase of online surveillance over self-regulation in the United Kingdom may sway the pendulum the other way rather than addressing the root harms such as why the nation is addicted to violence. This sediment is shared concerning news media, which is regulated by Ofcom, operating under the Communications Act 2003, however is 'funded by fees paid …by the companies' which concerns its legitimacy if the interests of capital gain are shared between the organisations (Ofcom, 2003). Though heavier restrictions on media content urge the breaching of the freedom of expression (Human Rights Act, 1998) which has historically been used in Nazi German propaganda. With exploring the fundamental areas of media violence, common threads emerge regarding the incompatibility of the regulatory systems. The British Board of Film Classification is the regulatory statutory of films and games under the Video Recordings Act 1984 (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, 2014). Despite relaxation in its regulatory power since the 1990s, it has revised guidelines in January 2014 increasing its censorial stance due to technological developments requiring stricter regulation (Pett, 2015). This and the regulation of films and games via PEGI labels highlight the concern of deeming harm concerning age as the primal factor for sensitive content, inconsiderate of vulnerable people or independent sensitivity levels in adults, thus regulation advancements are necessary. Apparent in a game called Manhunt 2, the player can

participate in killing innocent people in barbaric orchestrated snuff films was restricted from being purchased despite being advertised as a PEGI 18 by the British Board of Film Classification (2020).

Moreover, a similar system of labelling films and games media with the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB) in the United States has recently started to scan faces to verify the age of the parent using Gray Level Co-occurrence Matrix (GLCM) by extracting facial texture features to ensure parental consent is provided (Wang and Chen, 2021). However, the influx of facial recognition technology is bordering the line of breaching the right to privacy (Human Rights Act, 1998) with the ESRB confirming that 'data or images are intended to be never stored …or shared' though critics have issued it is 'likely to raise alarm bells' (Dwiar, 2023). Given the limitations in facial recognition and the reliance on parents to self-regulate in a society containing greater harm, there is truly no way to know whether children have access to age-locked content. Violent content, despite showing its harmful impacts does not seem to currently concern the government as much as hate speech online to risk breaching human rights thus instead public awareness is encouraged regarding the dangers of media violence, especially to demographics such as the elderly populations, neurodivergent individuals, and international citizens who may not understand the gravity of the media's harmful nature.

In conclusion, this essay has outlined the origins of violent media as a new form of harm in addition to the perpetuated violence the internet has brought to newer generations. This assignment has analysed the early implications of aggression such as the Bobo Doll experiment regarding the emergence of Zemiology in the way that violent media is a new form of social harm. Firstly, films and game violence have proven to manipulate people's tolerance of gore and influence violent tendencies with the added concern of the rise of technological advancements in CGI and Unreal Engine 5, having progressed more violent and lifelike productions accustomed to the "demand" manufactured by society that needs the reconsideration that age is not the primal factor of violence tolerance in the regulatory PEGI and ESRB systems. Additionally, news sources and the September 11th attacks were analysed to express how the media can be used to catalyse violent imagery information causing emotional harm, moral panics and the demonisation of Muslims as terrorists often for "newsworthy" organisational monetary gain. Additionally, with the emergence of social media and its cosmopolitan effect on society's communication, applications such as YouTube and Twitter install beliefs on the public via mediated algorithms and advertisements and hosts as grounds for hate speech, which has been combatted by regulations of criminalisation. But more seriously, a heightened rate of experiencing invisible violent media in social media highlights the harms of screen culture and the difficulty in balancing freedom of speech and breaches of human rights. Lastly, current media violence regulation has been critically

analysed to highlight the challenge in that although the internet is a catalyst for information, too much graphical and violent information is exposed to the public which requires occasional temporal monitoring to assert how to regulate the content. Thus, with the direction criminology is taking in branching into new avenues of thinking there could be harsher surveillance which may enact the societal pushback of the government being too controlling and the breaching of the human right to privacy, thus the harms of media violence is a challenging problem to solve humanely.

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