

HE DOESN'T EVEN SPEAK.



SO HOW CAN HE TELL YOU  
WHAT TO DO?



**BLOOD**

**=GUTS=**

**MURDER &**

THE REMOTE CONTROL



(AND WHY YOU DON'T FIT INTO ANY OF IT)

THE "EFFECTS" OF  
MEDIA VIOLENCE

**Kids these days!** They're all wasting their spare hours, or so we're told, with immoral trash like "Grand Theft Auto," the now-notorious series of slickly decorated and powerfully addictive video games. As Sen. Hillary Clinton explained last week at a forum hosted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, "They're playing a game that encourages them to have sex with prostitutes and then murder them."

Fans of "GTA" claim this is a typical non-gamer's misinterpretation -- it might be possible to kill hookers in the game, but it won't necessarily help you win -- but let's let that go. There's no doubt that "GTA" allows you, for example, to play the role of an ex-con trying to take over a vice-addled city by gunning down drug lords, cops, low-flying aircraft and pretty much everything and everybody else. These games revel in their pseudo-noir amorality, and they're basically designed to be loathed by parents, school principals and tweedy psychologists.

Clinton's attack on the latest manifestation of the Media Demon -- you know, the evil force within video games, action movies, rap songs, comic books, dime novels, Judas

# THE MYTH OF MEDIA VIOLENCE



Andrew O'Hehir

Priest records played backward and, I don't know, Javanese puppet theater and cave hieroglyphics -- is a depressingly familiar ploy in American politics. When you can't make any progress against genuine social problems, or, like Sen. Clinton, you seem religiously committed to triangulating every issue and halving the distance between yourself and Jerry Falwell, you go after the people who sell fantasy to teenagers.

What might be most interesting about this latest vapidness, in fact, is what Clinton didn't say. Five years ago, in the wake of the Columbine massacre, we were told that there was no serious debate about whether media violence contributed to teenage crime in the real world. A clear link had been established, the case was closed, and the only question was what we were going to do about it. By contrast, Clinton's comments were surprisingly mild and almost entirely subjective. She called violent and debauched entertainment a "silent epidemic," essentially arguing that it has effects, but we don't quite know what they are.

Over the long haul, Clinton said, violent media might teach kids "that it's OK to dis people because they're women or they're a different color or they're from a different place." Perhaps more to the point, she added: "Parents worry their children will not grow up with the same values they did because of the overwhelming presence of the media." That was it -- no claims that we were breeding a nation of perverts and murderers, and no mention of all the supposed science indicating a link between simulated mayhem and the real thing. Playing "GTA" and watching Internet porn might lead your kids to "dis" somebody, or to grow up with different values from yours (or anyway to make you concerned that they might). Katy bar the door!

"We're looking at to what extent the chronically aggressive individuals show differences in terms of gene expressions compared to those on the normal trajectory," Tremblay told ScientificAmerican.com. "The individuals that are chronically aggressive have more genes that are not expressed." This is an indication "that the problem is at a very basic level," he added.

A pregnant woman's smoking, drinking, poor nutrition or exposure to excessive stress can cause or contribute to a fetus's abnormal genetic development, Tremblay said.

Damaged genes can prevent a child from learning skills for self-expression, reducing his ability to interact socially, and thus make him prone to violence. Tremblay cited genes involved with language acquisition and development as an example; children who can't speak well get frustrated easily and can erupt violently as a result.

Pointing to other research that claims to link media violence and childhood behavior, some social conservative groups as well as child advocacy organizations have in recent months urged Congress to take action against media violence, particularly violent TV programming and videogames. Sen. Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) has promised to introduce legislation that would regulate TV violence, but has yet to do so.



**No one seriously doubts** that the mass media have profound effects on our attitudes and behavior. But the effects vary tremendously, depending on the different ways that media content is presented, and the personality, background, intelligence, and life experience of the viewer.

# THE EVIDENCE PILES UP



There have been instances where criminals or others engaged in violent behavior have imitated specific aspects of a violent movie or TV show. But **the fact that millions of other viewers have not engaged in**

imitation suggests that predisposition is the important factor, and that if the bad actors had not seen that particular movie or show, they would have imitated something **else. It is impossible to predict which**

episodes or descriptions will be imitated by unstable individuals, and equally **impossible to ban every book, movie, magazine article, song, game, or other cultural product that somebody might imitate.**

Violence has been a subject in literature and **the arts since the beginning** of human civilization. In part, this simply reflects the unfortunate realities of the world. But it's also likely that **our fascination with violence**

satisfies some basic human needs. The adrenalin rush, the satisfactions of imagination, **fantasy, and vicarious adventure,** probably explain why millions of nonviolent people enjoy violent entertainment.

Somewhere between 200 and 300 laboratory experiments, field studies, and correlational studies have been done on **media violence (not thousands, as some activists have claimed),** and their results are dubious and inconsistent. In some cases, experimenters have manipulated disappointing results until they came up with at least **one positive finding; then proclaimed that the experiment supported their hypothesis that media violence causes** aggression. Some experiments have found more aggressive behavior after viewing nonviolent shows like Sesame Street and Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

## LACK OF SOCIAL SKILLS AT CORE OF PROBLEM

What makes kids smack others and maybe grow into homicidal adults? Not the tube, says new research, but a lack of social skills.

All babies are born with violent tendencies, which most kids learn to control as they grow older, a U. of Montreal professor who has spent more than 20 years studying 35,000 Canadian children told ScientificAmerican.com. Those who don't or can't learn are the ones who become violent.

**"IT'S A NATURAL BEHAVIOR, AND IT'S SURPRISING THAT THE IDEA THAT CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS LEARN AGGRESSION FROM THE MEDIA IS STILL RELEVANT,"**

Richard Tremblay told the website. "Clearly youth were violent before television appeared."

Tremblay, who is about to present his preliminary findings to Britain's academy of sciences in London, rejects the recently renewed criticisms of media violence as behavioral influences, instead maintaining that "unexpressed" or damaged genes affecting behavioral skills are the likely culprits.



As dopey as Clinton's remarks are, I don't mean to ridicule parents and educators for their legitimate concerns. Of course I'm not certain that violent movies and games (or, for that matter, dumb-ass sitcoms and vapid reality shows) are harmless. My own kids are still too young for this question to matter much, but of course I hold onto the naive hope that they'll spend their formative years hiking the Appalachians and reading about the Byzantine Empire, rather than vegetating in media sludge. But it's long past time to face the fact that while it's legitimate not to like violent media, or to believe it's psychologically deadening in various ways, the case that it directly leads to real-life violence has pretty much collapsed.

Hillary Clinton's equivocation may be something of a compulsive family trait, but it also reflects how muddy this issue has become since the summer of 2000, when the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and several other professional busybody organizations issued a joint statement proclaiming that "well over 1,000 studies" had shown a direct connection between media violence and "juvenile aggression." In 2002, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker

wrote that it had become an article of faith "among conservative politicians and liberal health professionals alike ... that violence in the media is a major cause of American violent crime."

Actually, there never was any such consensus in the academic fields of psychology, criminology or media studies. And there weren't well over a thousand studies of media violence either -- that was one of the many myths and legends that sprung up around this question. In the years since then the mavericks have been increasingly heard from. Even in the theatrical United States Senate hearings convened a few days after the Columbine shootings in 1999, MIT professor Henry Jenkins observed that the idea that violent entertainment had consistent and predictable effects on viewers was "inadequate and simplistic," adding almost poetically that most young people don't absorb entertainment passively, but rather move "nomadically across the media landscape, cobbling together a personal mythology of symbols and stories taken from many different places."

Jenkins was a lonely voice at the time, but more recently the edifice of mainstream certainty has begun to crumble. Psychologists like Pinker, Jonathan Freedman, Jonathan Kellerman and Melanie Moore have counterattacked against their own establishment, arguing that media-violence research to date has been flawed and inconclusive at best, and a grant-funding scam at worst. Some

have gone further, suggesting that violent entertainment provides a valuable fantasy outlet for the inevitable rage of childhood and adolescence, and probably helps more children than it hurts. In the teeth of the 1999 hurricane, media scholar Jib Fowles published "The Case for Television Violence," a dense, dry and devastating dissection that surely counts as one of the most important books about American culture to appear in the last decade.