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Why are we fascinated with violence?

An investigation of mass media's role in depicting violence as entertainment

Kseniya Dmitrieva

Abstract

A literature review was conducted to determine the most common patterns in violence-related topics portrayed in mass media. Psychological research suggests that violence is a by-product of society: as a *learned* behavior, violence and aggression are experienced through *modeling* by adults, peers, and the outside sources. With the vast emergence of mass media in the 20th and 21st centuries, mass media channels have been branded “responsible” for the formation of aggressive behaviors in children and young adults.

The relationship between publications of violent events in mass media and viewers' role is far more complicated. Mass media is a common way of communicating new information and serves as a source of entertainment. When speaking of crime, the line between news and entertainment is often blurred. Mass media, like daily newspapers and news channels, present the most up-to-date information about many events, including crime. Serving as the gatekeepers between criminal events and the public, these news outlets have the power to maintain what stays “hot,” the power to leave out certain details, or to present events in the light that is most appealing to the average viewer. Sensational, most gruesome cases become especially newsworthy. Cases like robbery, rape, murder, and aggravated assault amount to only 11% of all criminal cases; serial killings amount for less than 1% of all criminal cases; and the vast majority of incarcerated adults are nonviolent offenders. Nevertheless, it appears that these cases are far more commonplace and frequent.

The frequency paradox, a term developed while working on this project, is the irrational idea that random violent crimes are far more prevalent and commonplace than they actually are, due to the frequency and the dramatized way in which mass media outlets present them to the viewers. Only one-fifth of violent crimes made national news broadcasts in the past twenty years; the majority of them includes elements of “sensationalism” – especially violent, have unusually high death toll, and tend to stir political discussions. The frequency paradox may be responsible for creating moral panics, a public outcry for political change. The frequency paradox, however, does not apply to *all* channels of mass media, but only those that value quantity over quality.

New-generation mass media, like podcasts, YouTube channels, true crime books, and unsolved mystery documentaries have created a space for crime-obsessed individuals to talk about true crime to other crime-obsessed individuals. New-generation mass media creates a deviated culture from those who are merely interested in “consuming” crime as mindless entertainment. New-generation mass media calls for help from the investigator within us, spending hours listening to facts and evidence of crimes, and to aid in solving them. This contemplative space challenges the frequency paradox with public action to solve murder mysteries and disappearance cases. This project will suggest an idea that emergence of new generation true crime media is a product of socially-aware, socially-educated, socially-connected Millennials...

“Why are we so fascinated with violence?” is a question that has been asked thousands of times. Some evolutionists explain this fascination with gore and violence as our animalistic, prehistoric nature.⁹

Violence is often associated with exertion of power, whether it is over another individual or a whole society. Rapid advancements in one culture drive its citizens to explore beyond the borders, to dominate the lands, the hearts, and the minds of people who are weaker. Aggression is contradictory when it does not support our beliefs. Why do we prohibit killings but vote for capital punishment? Our history is built on the acts

of violence: wars, terrorist attacks, mass killings, gruesome punishments of the medieval times.^{9,13} These events are not novelty to our ears; we are surrounded by violence in fiction and in reality. This project does not aim to explore the history of violence neither does it answer the questions like “how do we prevent violence?” or “why do people exhibit violent, aggressive behaviors?” The main focus here is to understand *why* we are *attracted* to it? What are some ways in which, perhaps, mass media affects our perceptions of violent acts? And how does it possibly desensitize

us towards horrendous homicides, slaughters, and assaults.

The effects of mass media's portrayal of violent events have concerned researchers since the emergence of television. Bandura (1963), in his groundbreaking Bobo doll experiments, has concluded that children are twice as likely to express aggressive behaviors after observing a real-life adult through a television set who has beaten and kicked around the doll. He explains it as a *social-learning theory*, where adults modeling particular behaviors can have tremendous impacts on children. He states: "Observation of adults displaying aggression conveys a certain degree of permissiveness for aggressive behavior."¹ Centerwall (1992) similarly concluded that infants instinctively imitate adult behavior, even negative behaviors. Children as young as 14 months of age are able to observe behaviors seen on TV and incorporate observed behaviors into their own.³ The majority of these studies were driven by the assumption that television is a 'gateway' to certain behaviors, such as aggression, smoking, sex, and other negative behaviors. More recent studies have focused their attention on video games and their role in exposing children to violence and murder through first-person shooters. With their vast popularity among young children, researchers have jumped on the bandwagon of proving video games as a bad influence rather than their direct benefits to cognitive development.⁵ There is little conclusive evidence, however, regarding video games' role in generating aggressive and even violent behaviors in adolescents and young adults. But the television debate remains heated.

The next closest source to observing violence, other than being a direct participant or a victim of violent events, is television. Numerous experimental studies and empirical evidence suggest a strong

positive correlation between observing brutality on TV and imitating aggressive behaviors in children.^{1,3,12} Long-term exposure to these observations can predispose children to violent behaviors into adulthood.¹² Mass media, especially daily newspapers and news channels present the most up-to-date information about many events, including crime events. As much as 95% of the American public depends heavily on news media for information about crime.⁸ Serving as the gatekeepers between criminal events and the public, these news outlets have the power to maintain what stays "hot" and what does not, the power to leave out certain details, or even present these events in the light that is most appealing to the average viewers. News channels and newspapers disproportionately report violent crimes, and tend to focus attention on "sensational" matters.² Cases like robbery, rape, murder, and assault get a lot more attention than minor felonies and violations.¹³ Overrepresentation of crime and violence on TV can be explained by a strategic move to maximize viewership numbers and therefore profits "by catering to the public's fascination with rare and sensational acts of violence." To make crime news more entertaining and appealing to the consumers, "the news media over-represent violent, interpersonal crimes because they are dramatic, tragic, and rare in occurrence."⁸

Similarly, crime television series have an appeal for "sensational" criminal cases. Allegedly based on actual events, crime shows like *America's Most Wanted* (AMW) and *Unsolved Mysteries* tend to dramatize details of the crimes. Content analysis showed that these television series "convey an unpredictable world filled with unsafe people and places," creating a sense of "modern danger."² Analysis of TV vignettes from two reality-crime shows, 92% of AMW vignettes depicted violent, personal

crimes (rape, murder, kidnapping, child molestation, and robbery). Murder is depicted in 52% of both shows. The researchers concluded that criminals in these shows are presented as “traditional urban legend villains, such as drifters and hitchhikers. Other criminals are portrayed as Satanists, gang members, and drug dealers.” The most frightening criminals have been portrayed as psychologically unstable, “typically, a crazed killer, a psycho, a maniac, emotionally disturbed, showed no emotion, disregards authority.” Given sociopathic/psychopathic characteristics, depictions of crime and criminals are dramatized and stereotyped; this deepens the viewers’ sense of imminent, commonplace danger, creating a perception that “no one, no matter how careful, is safe,” conclude Cavender and Bond-Maupin.² Crime as “a central component in entertainment,” presented as “realistic,” blurs the boundary between reality and fiction, desensitizing the audiences towards serious and violent offenses.⁶ Similarly, more contemporary television “crime scene investigation” series have sustained their popularity since the late nineties. *Law and Order* has been on air for twenty seasons (1990 – 2010); *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* has been approved for 18 consecutive seasons (1999 - present); *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* was on air for fifteen seasons (2000 – 2015) and documented an estimated of 78.3 million viewers; *CSI: Miami* was approved for ten consecutive seasons (2002 – 2012); shows like *NCIS* and *Criminal Minds* have been on air since early 2000s (2003 and 2005 respectively) and are still ongoing. Continuous popularity of these shows can be correlated with continuous interest from the public; most of these television series have maintained an audience of above 5 million viewers.²⁵

More recent fictional series like *Game of Thrones* (10.4 million total viewers),

Orange is the New Black (6.7 million viewers), and several Marvel-owned series (*Jessica Jones*, *Luke Cage*, *Daredevil*) that openly present violent content “on demand,” have seen similar viewership numbers.²³ These are just a few examples of violent television shows that give violence an entertaining angle. Portraying cruel and yet likeable villains, *Game of Thrones* has made violence more appealing, sometimes more romantic. Appealing to viewers’ attachment to certain characters, *Orange is the New Black* has given a spin on the view of women who commit crimes as being independent and strong. With the inclusion of superheroes in Marvel series as crime-fighters, the violent acts are also given more appeal.²⁵

Undoubtedly, violent crimes like murder, rape, and assaults are considered wrong by many civilized societies. Many countries have established rules and laws that prohibit its citizens from committing these acts. Many countries have created prisons to punish perpetrators (retribution and rehabilitation) and keep them from committing these acts again (incapacitation).²⁰ Acts of violence are far rarer than we would expect. The vast majority of prisoners are nonviolent offenders. Serial killers amount for less than 1% of all perpetrators.²⁰ The rates of violent crime have been declining in recent years, becoming lowest since the 1960s.^{15,20} In 2014, an estimated 11,205,833 total arrests were made: 498,666 for violent offenses; 1,553,980 for property crimes; 1,561,231 for drug abuse violations; 1,238,190 for larceny theft; and 1,117,852 for DUI. In 2015, a total estimated number of murders in the U.S. was 15, 699. In March 2017, 3.1% of all offenders in the U.S. were incarcerated for homicide, aggravated assault, and kidnapping.¹⁵

So why then, does it seem like intimate, violent crimes are so prevalent and commonplace? Katz (1987), in his extensive research on *what makes crime news*, has noted that violent crimes make up a small percentage of crimes and yet they get an enormous amount of news coverage. "Murders and rapes, less frequent crimes in FBI statistics, are among the most frequent crime subjects on both news and entertainment shows," states Katz.¹³ Through extensive and frequent coverage of the same few violent events, these crimes start to seem more commonplace and prevalent. For a comparison, in 1980, violent crime made up about 70% of crime news as compared to only 20% of the official crime rate.¹³ Because they appear more prevalent, we as spectators start to make generalizations about these types of crimes. Such a sensational, overly-displayed act of armed robbery committed by a 10-year-old child makes an average viewer assume that many (if not all) children "these days" are capable of committing an armed robbery.¹³ Even if that case was a single shocking occasion, many news outlets will emphasize the word "shocking" rather than "single." The dramatic, selective way in which crime news is presented, makes us believe that there is an imminent immediate threat to society, its values and its safety.¹³ In the longitudinal investigation on news coverage of mass killings in the United States, Duwe (2000) concluded that only about one-fifth of all violent mass killings were reported on national news. They were deemed as the most "newsworthy," a characteristic that is defined by most shocking, one-of-a-kind occasions. Newsworthiness, as they determined, contained exceptionally high death tolls, which later was named "body-count journalism," included a crazed killer, and appealed to the viewers' political representations.⁸

Continuous circulation of most sensational criminal cases in the news and television, creates *the frequency paradox* (a term developed while working on this project), defined as the irrational idea that rare violent crimes appear far more prevalent and commonplace to an average spectator due to the frequency and the dramatized fashion in which mass media outlets present them to the viewers. The frequency paradox may be responsible for creating moral panics, and shifting public opinions about sensitive issues that later call for political change. Some of the most famous examples of moral panics include: the all-time famous Salem witch trials, the 'hysteria' over the alleged rise of violent crime in the late 1960s that has created a greater public concern with neighborhood youth's behavior; the 'War on Drugs' that has started a hysteria over the increased consumption of crack cocaine in the 1970s and still drives political and social agenda today; panics over video games and them being the main reason for school shootings; the rise of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s have polarized public opinions about the LGBTQ community; the 'War on Terror' that has dramatically increased the levels of government control. Can you think of some of the most recent events that have caused an unprecedented panic in the society? Moral panics tend to exacerbate the levels of concern over a certain issue that is perceived to "attack" the moral state of our populations. They are hostile, alienating, often too simplistic, and are characterized by disproportionate exaggeration of facts or the lack of whatsoever.^{4,11} Moral panics tap into public sentiment, pushing for an outcry for change. The catchy, often overused slogans continuously circulated in the media drill into the hearts and minds of the public, deflecting attention from the facts of the situation and the reason for the panic itself. The incidents that harvest extensive news coverage are more likely to ignite public

fears, and it is no longer a conspiracy to suggest that public outcries for harsher laws and increased policing do half the job for legislators to influence social and political change.^{4,6,16}

The frequency paradox has taken over some of the most common channels of mass media like television and news, the channels that value quantity over quality. It influences an average viewer - a mindless panic-consuming machine. It keeps us 'hooked' on the latest sensational criminal cases through the continuous exposure. It can be speculated that the emergence of new-age mass media, like podcasts and YouTube channels have generated a new spectatorship. New age media deviates non-average spectators from those who are merely interested in 'consuming' crime as mindless entertainment; such as the daily news readers who do not *sustain* an interest in crime stories – "they are not interested in analyzing the patterns of crime coverage, neither do they theorize about sociological implications of crime."¹³ The creators of new-age mass media are often referred to as social influencers. Self-administered channels of new-age mass media experience less censorship and are able to create a contemplative and interactive space for both the viewers and the administrators.

YouTube and podcasts are quickly gaining popularity. Official YouTube statistics reports state that the social media network "has over a billion users - almost one-third of all people on the Internet. As of March 2015, creators filming in YouTube Spaces have produced over 10,000 videos which have generated over 1 billion views and 70+ million hours of watch time." The majority of viewers mainly belong to Generation X and Millennials, ranging between the ages of 18 and 49.²²

As for podcast audiences, the number of people in the U.S. who are aware of the term 'podcast' increased from 22% in 2006 to 55% in 2016; that is an estimated 150 million people. The mean time of listening to a podcast in one week is about 4 hours and 10 minutes with an average of 5 podcasts listened in one week. Similar trends in age are also noticeable; the majority of podcast listeners belong to Generation X and Millennials. Approximately 38% of listeners are between the ages of 18-34 and 34% are between the ages of 35-54. 41% of listeners have a median income of 63K; 78% have some college education, or graduate education.¹⁹ Sociologists who have been investigating the consumption of news media suggest that highly educated audiences are more likely to critique traditional news media as they are more exposed to academic criticisms of these channels of communication.⁷

The creators are able to interact with their audiences through comment sections allowing them to create original content that often reflects the popular demand. Subscribing to a channel that produces the content of one's preference generates 'types' of audiences. Certainly, many viewers are subscribed to more than one channel as they may have many interests, but one trend is evident: Unlike television, where most viewers watch whatever is on air, YouTube generates the list of 'suggested' videos based on the video categories that are most watched by a specific viewer. Podcast creators, similarly, create a subculture of listeners who spend hours upon hours on a podcast that matches their interests. Unlike one-way communication about crime that an average viewer receives from news media and television, YouTube channels and Podcasts allow audiences to contribute to the creation of content.

More recently, the topics like conspiracy theories, crime mysteries, and missing persons' cases have been circulating these channels of mass communication. Some content creators even completely devoted their channel to these topics. One particular YouTube creator John Lordan (going by YouTube name LordanArts) creates content that specifically covers missing persons' cases, murder mysteries, and conspiracies. Spending hours on researching these cases, he is able to present as much factual information as possible. Referring to his audiences as 'BrainScratchers,' LordanArts calls for viewers' attention to some cases that received little to no media attention in hopes to solving these mysteries. Some viewers personally contribute their research to his growing channel.²⁶

One particular podcast has captured the public's attention to not only its content but also the possibility of making a change as a listener; 'Serial' podcast covered the case of Adnan Syed allegedly involved in a 1999 Baltimore murder case. 'Serial' has taken a responsibility of presenting all of the facts and the truths of the case. Since its original release date on October 3rd 2014, 'Serial' was the fastest podcast ever to reach 5 million downloads by November 2014. By December of 2014, the number of downloads has increased to 40 million. An average number of times each episode of 'Serial' was downloaded estimated to approximately 3.4 million. Following the footsteps of 'Serial,' podcasts like 'Someone Knows Something,' 'Unsolved,' 'Criminal,' 'Those Conspiracy Guys,' 'The Generation Why Podcast,' 'Missing Maura Murray,' etc. have devoted their time and efforts to moving away from crime as mere entertainment and taking investigation into the hands of creators and listeners. Since the emergence of these podcasts, some of the cases have been re-opened and re-investigated. The case of Adnan Syed once

again gained public attention by creating a public movement for a fair re-trial.^{19,21}

Online forums are expanding, bringing together thousands of individuals who are eager to solve a crime. Two blogs in particular are gaining public attention: Reddit and Websleuths. Reddit emerged in June 2005, reaching as many as 250 million users in April of 2017.²³ The majority of Reddit users are between the ages of 18 and 29 (estimated 58%), followed by adults between the ages of 30 and 49 (approximately 33%).¹⁸ Relative to the general internet population, the vast majority of Reddit users are college-educated adults.¹⁷ Websleuths is a crime discussion forum where individuals are able to partake in investigations of criminal cases, trials, and missing persons cases. Launched in May 1999, by November 2016 it has reached over 100,000 users.²⁴

With the promising development of new-age media more research is needed regarding the audience trends and content analyses. Perhaps, investigating the influences that these media channels have on audiences can provide us with a better understanding of how important it is to distinguish between the traditional and non-traditional crime consumption. On the other hand, an investigation of the audiences' contribution to these channels may give insight into the interactivity of new-age media as compared to traditional media outlets.

So why are we fascinated with violence? The answer is complicated; to be definite in deciding whether our interests influence mass media to present more violent content or if mass media keeps us "hooked" on violence would be synonymous with solving the "chicken and egg" riddle. It is complicated mainly because mass media is created by a select group of individuals who are able to give us the content that they

deem worthy of viewers' attention; if we did not enjoy crime, we would not have kept *CSI* and *Law and Order* ratings high for over twenty years. The answer may potentially lie somewhere in the origins of human behavior: perhaps, the fascination with violence is a simple result of human curiosity. The majority of us are neither a criminal nor do we want to commit crimes; yet we are curious to see what lies in the mysterious, unknown underside of our society where the rules are broken without regard to human life or authority. So crime media becomes a peephole into this lifestyle.

One thing is clear – there are an increasing number of educated young adults being exposed to non-traditional media channels. The exposure to multiple sources of information may increase the levels of critique towards a certain issue. Blind consumption of crime is being challenged by the generation of young adults whose interest in crime lies beyond the typical Friday night news session. The desire to participate in solving mystery cases is now increasing thanks to their exposure to social media.

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