Encyclopedia of
MEDIA VIOLENCE

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SCREEN SIZE AND VIOLENT CONTENT, EFFECTS OF

Since the 1930s, media violence has appeared on screens of increasingly varying shapes and sizes. Violent content can now be seen in formats ranging from a gigantic IMAX movie to a tiny mobile smartphone game. Consuming violent content in these diverse forms has the potential to differentially shape audience responses. This entry presents a brief overview of screen size as a media technology variable. It then reviews research findings on the effects of screen size and concludes with theoretical considerations for media violence effects as a function of screen size.

Screen Size as a Media Technology Variable

The early 1930s Payne Fund studies on the content of motion pictures called attention to the amount of violence in big-screen movies. Since that time, screen sizes have gotten both smaller and larger. The wide diffusion of television in the 1950s brought smaller-screen violent content into homes, and the motion picture industry responded by introducing larger-screen formats such as Cinerama and, more recently, IMAX, which has a standard screen size of 72 × 52.8 feet. The increase in movie screen sizes has been paralleled by a steady increase in television screen sizes, with Japanese electronics manufacturer Sharp predicting the average television to be 60 inches by 2015. At the same time, screens are also getting smaller. Violent content is now being

consumed on handheld gaming systems and mobile devices such as the Apple iPhone, which has a 3.5-inch screen.

Screen sizes clearly vary more than ever, but a consideration of screen size must also factor in other aspects of screen technology. First, the width of screens has changed over time. The classic movie and television aspect ratio was 4:3 (meaning 4 units wide by 3 units high). Now, most movies have an aspect ratio of either 1.85:1 or 2.35:1, and high-definition television (HDTV) sets have an aspect ratio of 16:9. In both cases, the result is a wider screen than in the past. Second, viewing distance affects how screen size is perceived. A small screen placed directly in front of a viewer's eyes, as it might be when the viewer wears a head-mounted display (HMD), may appear to be enormous, while a large screen viewed from far away may appear small. Viewing distance calculators, accessible online, exist to help determine the optimal viewing distance for various sizes of screens. A third consideration is screen resolution. As screen size increases, image quality may appear worse, especially when viewed at close distance. This has become less of an issue, however, with newer high-definition formats than it was with standard-definition television.

Research on the Effects of Screen Size

Screen size effects have been the subject of numerous investigations. In a review of the literature on television screen size, Cheryl Campanella Bracken and Renee Botta (2010) noted that it is the most commonly studied television form variable, with experiments dating back to the early 1970s and peaking in

the 1990s. Generally, larger screen sizes have been shown to intensify reactions to content. Specific outcomes of large-screen viewing identified by Bracken and Botta include increased attention, arousal, dizziness, enjoyment, and telepresence (the sense of "being there" in the media environment). Research also has shown that screen size affects receiver perceptions of objects on the screen, with mixed findings. Larger screens have been shown to lead to both more and less favorable evaluations of people on the screen, for example.

No studies to date have directly examined how screen size affects reactions to violent content. In his book on media violence and youth, Steven Kirsh (2012) discussed how the moderating role of screen size in media violence consumption remains unknown. He speculated that movies viewed in theaters could produce greater effects than those viewed on television screens, consistent with research showing a stronger influence of larger screens.

There is indirect empirical evidence for this relationship. As discussed earlier, studies have demonstrated that larger screens create a greater sense of telepresence, or "being there." And telepresence has been predicted and shown to relate to aggressive outcomes, as summarized by Paul Skalski, James Denny, and Ashleigh Shelton (2010) in a review of the literature on telepresence and violence effects. Although no experiments in this area have manipulated telepresence using screen size, it follows because since screen size relates positively to telepresence, and telepresence relates positively to aggression, screen size may relate positively to aggressive outcomes. But given the wide variety of screen sizes in contemporary use, this statement must be considered tentative until directly tested through research.

Theoretical Considerations for Screen Size and Violent Content Effects

Despite the lack of research, media effects theories have suggested ways in which different sizes of violent screen content might affect audiences. Social cognitive theory posits that attention to modeled events begins the process by which audiences exhibit matching patterns. Larger violent images should be easier to attend to and thus more likely to be imitated. Similarly, exemplification theory suggests that information with greater vividness (such as stimuli on larger screens) will be attended to more, be more cognitively accessible, and exert a greater influence on judgment. Theoretical frameworks such as social

cognitive theory and exemplification might seem to point to large-screen violence having more adverse effects (on responses such as aggression and fear) than small-screen violence. But this may not always be true when contextual features of violence are considered. Very small screens, such as those on mobile phones, may make inhibiting cues like punishments and pain or harm less salient to viewers, making this form of consumption more problematic. Again, more research is needed before firm conclusions can be made about the potentially complex relationship among media violence, screen size, and exposure outcomes.

Paul Skalski

See also Social Cognitive Theory

Further Readings

Bracken, C. C., & Botta, R. (2010). Telepresence and television. In C. C. Bracken & P. Skalski (Eds.), *Immersed in media: Telepresence in everyday life* (pp. 39–62). New York: Routledge.

Kirsh, S. J. (2012). *Children, adolescents, and media violence: A critical look at the research* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Skalski, P., Denny, J., & Shelton, A. (2010). Presence and media effects. In C. C. Bracken & P. Skalski (Eds.), *Immersed in media: Telepresence in everyday life* (pp. 158–180). New York: Routledge.

SEX IN MEDIA, EFFECTS ON SOCIETY

Effects of sex in the media have been studied from many different vantage points and at many different levels. These include the ways sex in the media may affect individuals, interpersonal relationships, and larger societal structures, ideologies, and laws. At individual and societal levels, research on effects of sex in the media has focused predominantly on cognitions (e.g., perceptual, memory, and information-processing systems underlying maladaptive attitudes and behaviors, knowledge about sex, and sexual relations), attitudes (e.g., sexist attitudes, attitudes supporting violence, and sexually permissive attitudes), and behaviors (e.g., manifest sexual behaviors, sexually aggressive or sexually violent behaviors) using a variety of research designs and methodologies.