Encyclopedia of
MEDIA VIOLENCE

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⑤SAGE reference

an increase in suicide-related searches. However, a content analysis of search volume data collected by Google Insights for suicide-related searches in Japan between 2004 and 2009 found no significant correlation between suicide rates and the search terms *suicide* or *suicide method*.

Laura F. Bright

See also Cyberbullying, Definition and Effects of; Cyberbullying, Violent Content in; Desensitization Effects on Society; Pornography, Violent Content in; Pornography, Violent Content in: Effects of

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INTERNET VIOLENCE, INFLUENCE ON SOCIETY

The Internet offers immediate access to just about any type of media violence imaginable. The web offers uncensored violent writings, photos, videos, and games all within a single medium, giving it an unprecedented amount of violent content. Among adolescent users, immediate access to such content is also harder to supervise. With Internet connections on laptops and personal computers that are often housed in the privacy of an adolescent's bedroom, along with the addition of Internet access on cell phones, parental policing of the Internet activity of today's youths can be far more difficult than policing their television viewing, the books they read, the console video games they play, and any further adolescent usage of other traditional media. Moreover, the interactive nature of the Internet encourages users to share and even participate in violent behaviors. The distinct nature of violence on the Internet raises many questions about potential effects. This entry considers the influence of Internet violence on society. It begins by defining Internet violence and societal-level effects. It then reviews research on the societal influence of media violence. It concludes with future considerations for research and policy.

Preliminary Definitions: Internet Violence and Societal Effects

Internet violence includes both violent content and violent behavior online. In one of the few book chapters focusing broadly on Internet violence, Ed Donnerstein (2011) offered a typology of what Internet violence entails. At an initial level, he proposed, the medium makes all previous forms of violent media available to users, including print, film, [illegible], and video game violence. It then adds [illegible] violence to the mix, such as [illegible]

real-life executions, terrorist and hate sites, and other violent content that would be restricted from traditional media. Moreover, the Internet allows users to actively participate in media violence. They can send, create, and upload violent content. They can play violent games. And through social media, they can be perpetrators of real-life violence (when they communicate aggressive messages) or victims of violence (through cyberbullying). The vastness and sometimes starkly realistic nature of violence on the Internet, along with its participatory dimension, suggest a host of possible effects.

Although much of media theory and research has focused on individual-level effects, the enormous global popularity of the Internet has undoubtedly had a larger-scale impact. Here, the effects of Internet violence on life in general and criminal behaviors are discussed, beginning with two major examples.

Prominent Examples of Internet Violence and Societal Effects

One example of the societal influence of Internet violence can be seen in the popularity of websites containing videos of real-life violence. The Internet not only makes extreme violence available, but evidence has suggested that a large segment of society is seeking out this previously taboo content. In a critical study titled "Internet Spectatorship on Body Horror," Sue Tait (2008) wrote about Ogrish.com (now Liveleak), a popular website providing uncensored access to real-life violence. The original Ogrish.com included footage of accidents, suicides, and crime scenes. The site also became a repository for war-related footage during the second Iraq war and gained notoriety during the mid-2000s for hosting the beheading videos of Daniel Pearl (executed in 2002) and Nick Berg (executed in 2004). Tait notes that prior to the site's sale in 2006, the Berg video had been downloaded 15 million times, and each of the site's 19 other beheading videos had been downloaded several million times. Note that these numbers are just from one site—there were likely many others sources on the Internet providing access to the footage. The high viewership of these and other gruesome videos can be taken as an indicator of large-scale effects. People are now seeing real acts of violence they would otherwise not be able to view, increasing societal-level access to previously forbidden images.

A second prominent example of the Internet's influence on society can be seen in what journalist Jill Smolowe (and others) call "mean girl" copycat incidents, such as the beating of Florida teen Victoria Lindsay by a group of teens. The assault of Lindsay was captured on video and posted on YouTube, where it became a viral video sensation with millions of views. According to Smolowe (2008), the county sheriff involved in the case called the attack "absolutely animalistic" and said the perpetrators lured the victim to the home for the purpose of filming the beating and putting it online. It was not an isolated incident, however. One girl interviewed by Smolowe said she watches girl fights on the Internet "all the time," leading some to speculate about the extent to which girls and others are lured into perpetrating violence for the fame that it can bring. Just about anyone can shoot video today, and the participatory nature of the Internet allows them to share those videos with others. Because violence sells, it makes sense that some would use aggressive behavior to garner attention. This raises questions about the extent to which society is becoming more violent as a result. However, very few studies to date have specifically addressed Internet violence, and even fewer have examined its influence at a societal level.

Research on Societal Effects of Internet Violence

Of the research that has been done on the influence of Internet violence on society, studies by Michele Ybarra and colleagues (2008) that focused on aggressive outcomes have presented some of the most compelling findings. One investigation involved a survey of 1,588 youths ranging in age from 10 to 15 years. In the survey, respondents were asked if they had visited each of the following types of websites in the past 12 months: a hate site; a "snuff" site; a Satanic rituals site; a site showing pictures of war, death, or terrorism; or a site showing cartoons of stick people or animals being aggressed against. These items were intended to represent exposure to Internet violence, along with questions about the proportion of visited sites that contained violence involving real people and violence involving cartoons. The survey also included measures of (a) exposure to other violent media (including television, video games, and music), (b) the extent to which respondents engaged in seriously violent behavior (including acts likely to result in murder, aggravated assault, robbery, and sexual assault), and (c) control variables (including individual, family, school, peers, and community factors). Results of the survey revealed that 38% of youths

had visited one or more of the violent website types, and approximately 5% of the total respondents had engaged in one or more forms of seriously violent behavior in the previous year.

When Ybarra and colleagues looked at the statistical relationships between variables, they found that heavy exposure to Internet violence involving real people, compared with no such exposure, was associated with a five times greater likelihood of engaging in real-life violent behavior. This relationship emerged even after controlling for other risk factors such as anger proclivity, substance abuse, poor parenting, delinquent peers, and community violence. Heavy exposure to Internet violence was also found to be the form of media exposure most likely to relate to seriously violent behavior, surpassing television, video games, and music. The researchers concluded that, among violent media forms, Internet violence seems particularly concerning and may offer insights into young people's seriously violent behavior. They cautioned against interpreting their findings as causal, however, given the correlational nature of their study.

In a follow-up longitudinal study of 10- to 15-year-olds over a three-year period, Ybarra and colleagues (2011) found exposure to X-rated, sexually violent material to be associated with a six times greater likelihood of self-reported sexually aggressive behavior, including in-person sexual assaults and sexual harassment or solicitation through communication technologies. Studies of cyberbullying have also looked at online aggression of this nature, which appears to be on the rise. In Ybarra's research, the effect of sexually violent media on aggressive outcomes did not hold for exposure to nonviolent X-rated material. The Internet features copious amounts of both violent and nonviolent sexually explicit material, and consistent with research on pornography effects, violent pornography appears to be the most harmful. The easily accessible combination of sex and violence online represents another area of concern about the influence of Internet violence on society.

Future Considerations for Internet Violence and Society

The unique aspects of Internet violence, along with the compelling findings from studies on its effects, call for more research specifically addressing this topic. As Donnerstein notes, unlike traditional media for exposure to violence (which has been the subject of thousands of scientific studies), there is general consensus that considerably more research is needed on the influence of the Internet on children and adolescents. This includes research on Internet violence effects, which have only been examined in a handful of studies. Future research on Internet violence can help fill a major void in the literature by employing different methodologies (particularly ones better establishing causality), examining additional variables (including macro-level outcomes), and studying more populations (such as adults and racial and ethnic groups).

With a firm body of research on Internet violence in place, parents, policy makers, and others can make informed decisions. The scant amount of evidence on Internet violence effects to date suggests that it may be more problematic than other forms of media violence. At the very least, it adds another log to the fire of risk factors for violence in society.

Paul Skalski and James Denny

See also Internet Blocking; Internet Content, Effects of Violent; Internet Violence, Influence on Society; Internet Violence Laws

Further Readings

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INTERNET VIOLENCE LAWS

Concerns regarding Internet violence have increased as access to and use of the Internet have become ubiquitous in U.S. society. High-profile acts of