

The Intrinsic Appeal of Violence

A review of



The Lust for Blood: Why We Are Fascinated by Death, Murder, Horror, and Violence

by Jeffrey A. Kottler

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Reviewed by

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On June 27, 2011, the United States Supreme Court stuck a considerable pin in the balloon of media effects research when striking down a California law banning the sale of violent video games to minors (*Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association*, 2011). In speaking of this body of research, the Court proclaimed:

The State's evidence is not compelling. California relies primarily on the research of Dr. Craig Anderson and a few other research psychologists whose studies purport to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children. These studies have been rejected by every court to consider them, and with good reason: They do not prove that violent video games cause minors to act aggressively (which would at least be a beginning). Instead, "[n]early all of the research is based on correlation, not evidence of causation, and most of the studies suffer from significant, admitted flaws in

methodology” (*Video Software Dealers Assn.* 556 F. 3d, at 964). They show at best some correlation between exposure to violent entertainment and minuscule real-world effects, such as children’s feeling more aggressive or making louder noises in the few minutes after playing a violent game than after playing a nonviolent game. (pp. 12–13)

The court further criticized the common methods of this body of research, stating,

One study, for example, found that children who had just finished playing violent video games were more likely to fill in the blank letter in “explo_e” with a “d” (so that it reads “explode”) than with an “r” (“explore”) . . . The prevention of this phenomenon, which might have been anticipated with common sense, is not a compelling state interest. (p. 13, footnote 7)

I would like to think that the Supreme Court’s dismissal of this research (following though it is on the heels of a similar dismissal by the Australian government; Australian Government, Attorney-General’s Department, 2010) will bring about reflection on these issues among the psychological community. Seldom has a field limited by inconclusive findings and dubious methodology (Ferguson, 2010; Freedman, 2002; Grimes, Anderson, & Bergen, 2008; Savage, 2004) been so unscientifically promoted as has media effects research. Extreme claims about this research field—about a consistency that doesn’t exist, false claims that up to 30 percent of violence can be linked to media violence (Strasburger, 2007), favorable comparisons with smoking and lung cancer research in terms of magnitude of effects (Bushman & Anderson, 2001; since debunked, see Block & Crain, 2007; Ferguson, 2009), and claims that any criticism of this research is akin to creationism or denial of global warming (see Sinclair, 2011, for comments by researchers)—have been tolerated in this field for so long that they now risk dragging down the credibility of the psychological science as a whole (Hall, Day, & Hall, 2011).

It’s worth wondering, how did we get here? How did the field stop functioning as a science (arguably long ago; see Freedman, 2002, or Grimes et al., 2008, for discussions) and instead become more like an advocacy group, with the process of data collection little more than a pro forma effort to support a predetermined conclusion? There is a certain “sociology of media violence research” question lingering: how the sociology of a science can itself distort the scientific process. It doesn’t always happen, though. Most fields of psychology are very cautious, noting conflicts in data and debates. I’ve never seen another field of psychology make claims to a comparison with smoking and lung cancer research or global warming.

Part of the explanation may be the nature of the question, namely, our fascination with violence itself. Sometimes this is put forth as our *cultural* fascination with violence, implying that there is something structural within Western culture that creates this—that media violence is something that is *done* to people rather than something people demand.

But the new book by Jeffrey Kottler, *The Lust for Blood: Why We Are Fascinated by Death, Murder, Horror, and Violence*, argues that this is false, that the fascination with media violence (and violence and death in all forms) is something natural, an intrinsic facet of the human condition. Indeed there is nothing unique about the Western fascination with media violence, for interest in violent entertainment transcends cultures and history (see Ferguson, 2010). Nor does the consumption of violent media appear to be correlated with (much less a cause of) societal violence, for soaring rates of media violence in the last several decades are associated with (but unlikely the cause of) a massive decline in societal violence, at least in Western nations.

Kottler argues in his book that we have essentially gotten the question wrong. Decades have been lost attempting to examine how media violence affects the minds and behavior of humans (as in a number of recent reviews, including those of the U.S. courts including the Supreme Court, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the Australian Government, Kottler concludes that the research on media violence is inconclusive at best). Media effects research then, is a “quixotic quest” (Fischhoff, 1999), with victory constantly declared no matter the actual outcome.

Rather, Kottler argues, we ought to reverse the question. What is it about human nature that brings us to such fascination with media violence? Why does it seem to be such an integral part of our being that humans across cultures, even individuals who are perfectly pacific in their day-to-day lives, should value violent entertainment so highly?

It’s a seldom researched question, the question perhaps inhibited by the assumption of the media violence field itself that media violence is *done* to humans rather than a product of their natural inclinations. This, of course, becomes one of the major limitations of Kottler’s book: He asks an important and intriguing question, but, though he delves into the research literature and interviews scholars, he has little to go on beyond opinions, anecdotes, and speculations.

Some of these speculations are certainly worth consideration. For instance, violent entertainment may serve as an outlet for our fears about the hostile environment in which we live (more so in the past, of course) or about impending death. Violent media may serve to relieve day-to-day stress (see Ferguson & Rueda, 2010). Some violent ritualistic behavior (i.e., sports) may serve to bond particular groups of humans together, essentially forming a kind of evolutionary echo from our Paleolithic past.

Although I’m not necessarily a fan of the catharsis hypothesis, I do acknowledge that such beliefs have probably not been carefully studied because there is an urgency to squash them as opposing the traditional media effects theory. (It is intriguing that some research finds that longer exposures to media violence produce weaker, not stronger, effects; see Sherry, 2007, who argues for more sophisticated investigation of the catharsis hypothesis than has occurred in the past.)

Kottler considers various forms of entertainment in turn, including horror movies, aggressive sports, the fascination with serial murder, and so on. Through interviews with

researchers, industry producers, and consumers of media, Kottler concludes that fascination with media violence is largely the product of the need to reduce our fear of death and of our natural aggressive impulses, and as an outlet to reduce stress and hostility. It is, in essence, a fairly normative and natural process.

Indeed, similar themes have emerged at various levels of video game violence legislation culminating in *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Association* (2011), notably the concern that restricting violence from youths may be more damaging to normal development than allowing at least moderate levels of violence consumption. There is some research to support this, with the worst aggression and mental health outcomes typically found among youths with no exposure to media violence (Allahverdipour, Bazargan, Farhadinasab, & Moeini, 2010; Kutner & Olson, 2008). Nonetheless, Kottler's conclusions are likely to remain controversial among a psychological community that has tended too often to reify traditional media violence theory.

Kottler puts a mirror on the human condition that is, perhaps, unflattering, noting both our fears and our natural fascination with death and violence. Perhaps this explains the reification of media effects theory in psychology, that is, that media effects theory is a kind of moral reaction and dismissal of our baser urges (Ferguson, 2010). It is, perhaps, comforting to think that our darker nature is a product of the media rather than the inverse. It is comforting to think, too, that a few social policies and legislation might remove this darker side of nature, but almost certainly this is quite mistaken.

As noted, the greatest weakness of Kottler's book is that it does not have a large research body on which to draw. This is not because there is research to contradict Kottler's conclusions but rather because simply too few researchers have deigned to ask questions about media violence from the direction that Kottler suggests.

Nonetheless, academic psychologists are likely to feel a little underwhelmed by the various interviews, anecdotes, and speculations that Kottler uses to fill the gap. In general, the book is positioned with general audiences in mind, and though psychologists who are not in media violence research may find the book entertaining and illuminating, I suspect that most researchers on either side of the media violence debate will find the book to be comparatively superficial. This is not to say that *The Lust for Blood* is a bad book, just that it is not meant to be a dusty intellectual treatise of the sort that might be expected from a university press.

The bottom line, however, is that Kottler exposes serious gaps in our knowledge and approach to media violence, laying bare the assumptions of our field and its overall continued lack of knowledge and sophistication on this issue. It is time to reverse our questions, asking fewer about how we are a product of media violence and more about what our demand for media violence tells us about who we are.

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