

## **Harm and Offence in Media Content**

### **A review of the evidence**

Taking the European Union's Television without Frontiers Directive as their cue, the authors review the, mostly post 2000, research on harm and offence related to media usage. The European, indeed global, dimension is important as it brings in the relativity of definitions, particularly of offence. However, most readers will be interested in the research reviewed itself and what might be drawn from it. Most of that research is policy-relevant and lesser known (within academic circles) research by or for regulators is included.

Within Higher Education psychologists, sociologists, criminologists, political scientists, media arts and cultural studies practitioners will be interested in using this material. As a sociological criminologist who also teaches in media my inclination is to view media as largely harmless to the individual but performing ideological work at the social level; whereas the authors generally pull of the trick of arbitrating between contending views. The most polarised of protagonists will find their views challenged.

Early on they make it clear that the report doesn't examine the potential benefits of any media or physical harms like epilepsy. Moreover, they acknowledge the disproportion of studies from the United States and of TV. Not only may there be cultural differences there are clear regulatory ones.

They organise their material by medium, thus, in order we have: TV; radio; music; print; film; video and DVD; games; internet; telephony and advertising. These clearly have the potential to overlap and on new media frequently do. There is also a separate chapter on regulation. Whilst many commentators are concerned about children – and they are frequently mentioned in the text – the authors often combine these concerns with those for the 'vulnerable'. It is a mark of my liberal sentiments that I noted that they report on child protection on the internet without considering children to be a party to the issue.

I will attempt to summarise their main conclusions before selecting some of the best gobbets of information – often only paragraph long summaries themselves - from the sections. First is the need to separate discussion of harm from offence. Whilst it is clear many would argue harm is seen to be the more objective and offence more subjective neither seems to be long lasting. Moreover, harm is seen as more likely to effect the vulnerable whereas anyone might be offended – as recent discussions of veiled Muslim women and crucifix wearers attest.

Broadly they conclude that, as in 1961 when it was first suggested by researchers, TV 'is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial' (p197) and in general more specifics on each medium and supposed harms are needed and the array of complex interactions between them require more subtle research. However, they believe there are risks; more often for boys but there is no evidence for the internet or mobile phones making this worse – if only because the comparative data is not there yet. There are ethical and methodological issues

involved in assessing the effect of pornography on children but suggestions that sexually violent pornography may have harmful effects.

Evidence for 'agenda setting' or 'reality defining' was patchy but both boys and girls seemed to experience some negative effects from stereotypical gender portrayals. Racial stereotyping harmed the majority by encouraging racism and the minority by lowering self-esteem.

Whether you believe media causes violence or apathy the authors argue for the wider context to be included and media to be examined amongst all the other potential causes. Such an approach is methodologically and epistemologically sound but is not policy or headline-friendly. Indeed their caution has made the reviewing process very hard.

They organise their material by medium as most research is done in that fashion but this tends to mask findings that suggest different or opposite conclusions for similar material on different media and the challenge of new media and the convergence of media and its portability. A lot of very long term expensive research is going to be needed to sort this all out and all of this on a fast-changing technological and regulatory field.

Audience studies show TV viewers, particularly UK ones, to be sophisticated and accepting of apparently harmful or offensive material in context and that regulation largely works. The literature on radio is sparse save that aligned with music where harm and offence is alleged; and talk shows/phone-ins which might be offensive. Recent media stories claim: gangsta rap causes gun crime; emo encourages self harm and goth and thrash/death metal encourage suicide. Yet the authors only find sufficient material for five pages which are largely inconclusive (findings of correlation but not causation). Moreover a large part of that is given over to a report showing 15% of music videos contained violence, most of which was not justified or punished. Some experiments showed increased levels of violence/aggression but consumers and some cultural commentators offer readings against the grain. The authors note the offensiveness of many of the lyrics. Perhaps this is missing the point – they are meant to be offensive. On the other hand Tom Jones's, 'Delilah', casually encompasses the death of 'my woman'.

Print incorporates books and posters yet still only stretches to seven pages. Lady Chatterley gets a run out but mostly we examine the capacity of the newspapers to set the agenda. The growing popularity of manga is mentioned but no research cited. Science reporting is criticised and research into the coverage of executions in the USA shows neither advocates nor abolitionists are well served by the desire for sensation. There is no conclusive evidence that 'fear of crime' is caused but there is evidence of ignorance about crime.

Much of the research into film takes the same approach as that for TV but with a greater emphasis on pornography which draws in moralists and feminists with added concerns about children. Pornography is problematic but not 'the' cause of sex crime. The debate on video games is newer but follows the lines of the argument in film and TV.

Porn rules the net and research or concerns about it along with the possibilities of stalking and paedophile grooming. Clearly convergent mobile telephony offers some of the same problems and both are changing so fast research that reports of it cannot keep up. Advertising has intended effects which lead to the ban on smoking adverts and, in Sweden, to children at all.

Finally the chapter on regulation and the annex on the legal framework will be helpful to those concerned with policy matters.

In conclusion this is not a good read but a fabulous resource; a compendium it is to be dipped into. However, the lack of an index hampers attempts to dip as precisely as one might want. This is not a problem with radio – only 5 pages – but at 52 pages television presents more of a problem.

The very full executive summary and conclusions can be found at [http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/pressAndInformationOffice/PDF/Harm\\_and\\_Offence\\_summary.pdf](http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/pressAndInformationOffice/PDF/Harm_and_Offence_summary.pdf) but there is so much material in these pages they cry out for hyperlinks.