

Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development

Christopher J. Ferguson

# Adolescents, Crime, and the Media

A Critical Analysis

 Springer

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# Advancing Responsible Adolescent Development

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*This book is dedicated to my son, Roman,  
my favorite media-viewing companion.*

## About the Author

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# **Part I**

## **Media Depictions of Crime**



# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Crime and the Media

On April 16, 2007 Seung-Hui Cho carried out the worst school shooting in American history to date. On the Virginia Tech campus in Blacksburg, VA, Cho, a student at the university, first shot two other students in a campus dorm. The university administration appeared slow to respond and approximately 2 h later (and after mailing video tapes of himself to NBC) Cho entered Norris Hall and began a 9-min rampage that ultimately left a total of 32 people dead, and 17 wounded. Cho himself committed suicide after he appeared to have run out of targets and police were on the scene.

Soon after the massacre, before even the release of Cho's identity, several pundits began suggesting that violent video games were behind the massacre. Jack Thompson, a Florida lawyer and fervent anti-game activist, stated with conviction that video games were responsible for teaching the perpetrator (as of then unnamed) to become a murderer. Dr. Phil McGraw ("Dr. Phil") appeared on "Larry King Live" to assert that violent video games and other violent media are turning children into mass murderers. *The Washington Post* claimed Cho might have been an avid player of the violent game "Counter-Strike," but later retracted this statement when the information appeared to be faulty.

Of course, suggesting that the Virginia Tech massacre perpetrator was a player of violent video games was an evident "safe bet." Most young males play violent video games (Griffiths & Hunt, 1995). It was therefore a rather startling revelation when the Virginia Tech Review Panel (2007) charged by the governor with investigating the massacre, concluded that Cho was not a player of violent video games, and found no evidence that he had experience with video games any more violent than news media Sonic the Hedgehog. The "exoneration" of video games received considerably less attention than did initial speculation that video games were involved in inciting the Virginia Tech tragedy. Other commentators suggested that Cho may have been influenced by a violent South Korean movie *Oldboy*, due to similarities regarding the use of a hammer in that movie and Cho posing with a hammer in his videotaped manifesto. Ultimately, however, no evidence emerged that Cho had ever seen the movie (Sragow, 2007).

This was not the only controversy surrounding media and Virginia Tech. Soon after the attack, NBC aired the videotaped “manifesto” sent to them by Cho. This tape included some of Cho’s rantings and included images of him posing aggressively with weapons. Relatives of victims were understandably upset and the American Psychiatric Association issued a press release requesting that media outlets cease showing the video out of concern that it could spark “copycat” crimes. Indeed, in Cho’s video, he mentions the Columbine High School massacre, leading to speculation that media coverage of mass murders may convince disturbed individuals that mass murder is a potential road to fame. NBC defended their release of the tape, stating that their news team had thoroughly evaluated whether to release the video, had done so as sensitively as possible, and had gotten clearance from federal and state authorities.

The Virginia Tech massacre hits upon many of the issues that are relevant to the intersection of crime and the media. Namely:

1. Do forms of violent media such as television, music, video games, or pornography (whether violent or not) lead to the increased prevalence of certain types of violent crimes particularly among youth and young adults?
2. Are youth particularly susceptible to media effects being impressionable or impulsive?
3. Does media coverage of spectacular crimes such as school-shootings risk “glorifying” these incidents and promoting further violent acts?
4. How can the media balance FIRST-AMENDMENT rights with the public’s “right to know” about violent incidents, while at the same time being sensitive to the emotional responses of crime victims and victims’ families?
5. Do the media present a false impression of rampant youth violence in the USA due to extensive coverage of rare but extreme criminal events?

These questions, and their answers, form some of the integral issues at their heart of debates regarding media and crime.

Most people have opinions about these questions, one way or another, yet all of these issues remain the subject of intense debate, confusion, and uncertainty. Similarly, the public policy implications of these debates engender yet another layer of rancor. For instance, if it were true that violent media caused violent behavior in youth, how would the US government balance the competing needs of protecting its children with also protecting First-Amendment rights? If news media are guilty of overemphasizing violent crimes among youth, giving people a false impression of their commonality, should news media refuse to cover these events? Does the public believing that youth crime is more common than it actually is lead to unnecessary fear of crime, fear of youth themselves, or even irrational and ineffective legislative efforts to combat nonexistent crises? Can a news outlet reasonably be expected to discontinue such coverage if viewers then switch to a “more interesting” news outlet that still covers violent crimes among youth?

In this inaugural chapter of the book I discuss some of the basic issues present in debates about media and crime. This introductory chapter will present some of the basic social, political, and scientific issues that inform, or sometimes misinform,

discussions of media, crime, and adolescence. This chapter will provide a basic framework for the remainder of the book.

## 1.1 The Politics of Science: The Politics of Violence

A central theme of this book is that politics, science, emotion, and control are all virtually indistinguishable in the field of crime in the media. In this research field, tensions run high, politics and science intersect, and it becomes a Herculean task to attempt to separate fact from fiction, truth from hyperbole, science from agenda. This is particularly true where youth are involved, for most of us have a natural inclination to wish to protect children and adolescents from harm. I'll state upfront that I do not believe that it is humanly possible to write a truly "objective" book about youth and the media. Anyone who suggests that their view is the "objective" one is simply being dishonest with themselves, if not the public and scientific community.

Naturally, media companies such as video game companies and news corporations downplay their role in promoting negative behaviors such as youth violence or fears of crime including misinformation about crime trends among youth. This is nothing new, of course; all manner of industries from cigarettes to oil companies to pharmaceuticals have downplayed research suggesting that their products were harmful. One unique facet about media, however, is that some segments of the media, such as the news, appear to eagerly cover "the sky is falling" reports regarding the effects of other facets of the media such as video games. For example, one recent study found that media violence such as the video game *Doom* and other pop culture elements (such as the Gothic subculture) were the second most often discussed cause of the Columbine shooting in articles published in the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). By contrast less than 1 % of news stories focused on the responsibility and moral character of the perpetrators themselves. The general public is not always aware that there are considerable weaknesses in some aggression research which suggests links between violent media and aggression in youth. For instance, when people learn of a study suggesting a relationship between violent television and childhood aggression, most individuals likely picture kids hitting or biting each other. Many would likely be surprised to learn that these behaviors are seldom studied in media violence research; rather the kids (or adults, often college students) are popping balloons, filling in missing letters to make words, finishing story stems, or giving each other nonpainful white noise as part of a game. In the absence of data suggesting that these behaviors correlate highly with the sorts of "real world" aggressive behaviors among youth that people are concerned about, we just do not know how meaningful this kind of data is.

As noted above, media companies may have a vested interest in promoting beliefs about their products exonerating them from harm. Most people would naturally be suspicious of research funded by media companies. But they are not the only stakeholders with an axe to grind. One of the things to emerge from the recent US Supreme Court regarding violent video games, *Brown v EMA* (2011) which will be



discussed later in the book, was that much of the research used to claim that violent games had been funded by anti-media lobbying groups. This mixing of science and advocacy is worrisome for the objectivity of the data (Grisso & Steinberg, 2008).

This volume will introduce the study of media, crime, and youth research from the “ground floor.” As a media and violence researcher myself, I present the research as it is, not a glossed-over presentation of what some scientists, politicians, media companies, or special interests groups would like it to be for their “message” nor necessarily exonerating the media from any questionable motives or practices. The goal is for readers to become better informed to make up their own minds about the ways in which media and crime interact with one another. Whenever possible I would encourage readers to seek out primary sources and read arguments from all sides of the debates on crime and the media.

## 1.2 The Causes of Youth Violence

Understanding the origins of human violence—and perhaps more poetically human evil—is a central interest for many individuals and one which makes majors in criminology, criminal justice, sociology, and psychology popular on university campuses. In understanding why the science of youth, media, and crime is so politicized it may be helpful to understand that the science of violence is itself highly politicized. Kuhn (1970) argued that dogma develops in all sciences, although social science may have greater difficulties rising above dogma than other sciences because the “probability statistics” used in the social sciences, and definitions of “cause” based on these statistics (as opposed to the consistent results expected in the physical and natural sciences), make it difficult to establish clear criteria for when a theory ought to be discarded. The end result is a theoretical mansion of undead theories that continue to haunt social science long past their natural life span (Ferguson & Heene, 2012). The social sciences have gone through several major dogmatic waves, from Darwinism, to Psychoanalysis, to Radical Behaviorism to Social Learning Theory—and may be gradually on the path back to Darwinism. Nonetheless the adherents of each dogmatic step have been loathe to relinquish the theoretical models in which they have invested. This is part of human nature. However, the result is one pillar of the politicization of violence research: it is an internal pillar from within the scientific community itself, resting on the adherence to cherished beliefs at the expense of empiricism (McIntyre, 2006).

In the social sciences, research on causes of behavior in the latter part of the twentieth century focused mainly on external causes of behavior, mainly learning and socialization. It is not uncommon to hear it suggested that males are “socialized” to be aggressive, whereas females are “socialized” to be less aggressive and perhaps nurturing. A look at the animal kingdom suggests that this aggression difference between the sexes in fact is quite common, with males routinely engaging in aggression over the competition for females and territory (Morris, 1999). The argument from the majority of social science, however, has essentially been that