Alternatives to Entertaining Violence

Report of the International Consultation on
Violence in Media and Entertainment:
Challenges and Opportunities
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I. Overview

There is much to celebrate and to commend in contemporary media. Dramatic and violent stories communicated through films, news and games can educate, persuade and entertain. They can lead to thoughtful reflection, creative enterprise and compassionate action. They can broaden audiences' horizons and, with increasingly interactive media, expand social networks.

Nevertheless, violence in entertainment and news media is so pervasive that it can seem unavoidable and so powerful that it can appear irresistible, fascinating. Different kinds of violence recur again and again throughout today's creative media. The reaction is often either passive acceptance or fearful withdrawal. Both responses relinquish the power to determine the meaning and effect of media violence. This has serious implications for how the world is viewed and how communities act in the face of real suffering.

There is particular concern about the corporate influence upon portrayals of violence. The media in all their forms are largely a corporate profit-driven business with clearly-defined markets. Many media producers aim for maximum market share. They want people to have their eyes on the screen and their wallets in their hands.

In the *news media* the framing and depiction of violence can all too easily be determined by market concerns rather than by accuracy or by human dignity. The *film industry* too often resorts to predictable storylines that glorify violence. Furthermore, the violent images portrayed onscreen are commonly consumed without critical consideration. *Gaming* is the newest form of massively-consumed media with many games featuring violence. Although gaming alone is not a direct cause of violence, recent research suggests that along with other risk factors, violent gaming activities may offer a cumulative tipping point toward real violence.

In the face of the challenges of violence as portrayed in all of these media forms, the churches have a crucial role to play.

II. Core Issues Involved in a Christian Discussion of Media Violence

There are some core issues involving media that include the role of profit in production, the temptations of uncritical consumerism, and a common emphasis on individual fulfillment over the common good. All these affect the Christian view of respect for the dignity of all human beings. An uncritical production and consumption of media allows or even fosters a tendency to portray violence divorced from the larger historical, social, contexts in which real people live and where real violence rends the fabric of communities. There are unique issues related to different forms of media.

News media. News media are sometimes driven by different motives than those that many Christians have. They are often sensationalistic, seeking out the easy story to tell and seeking the easy explanation. The line between news and entertainment has become blurred. Various news media frame stories in such a way that hidden or chronic forms of violence are ignored. In addition, government influence, political pressure or economic constraints can shape the news media's messages. Share holders expect news corporations to turn a profit so the news content is shaped to deliver as large an audience as possible to advertisers.

With the exception of public service broadcasting the concentration of ownership and the profit motive can lead journalists to provide less critical interpretations of events resulting in the "dumbing down" of news stories. News pools and embedded reporters during wars serve as examples. Moreover, 'good news' stories are largely ignored. News media coverage can escalate a story on the public agenda while ignoring a story — even an important one — can 'kill' it. Clearly, the news media companies' business interests can undermine religious leaders' efforts to build peace.

Films. Many issues fuel different forms of violence in movies. These include the commercial basis of mainstream cinema, the fact that violence is intrinsically exciting, the almost mythic power of violent stories, and the need of media producers continually to heighten sensation and escalate spectacle. Elements of some cultures celebrate violence, and films can reflect this. Films present us with pre-packaged stories, drawing us into the characters' lives and inviting our investment in their fates. Since viewing films is a common form of recreational escape, it can encourage the uncritical

consumption of the images portrayed on the screen. Passive absorption of these images, while not necessarily inherently harmful, is certainly a cause for thoughtful reflection. There is a need for further deliberate discussion, as well as contextualization of the situations portrayed through these visual stories.

Digital Gaming. Digital gaming is a growing and global phenomenon. It may also be the most immersive media type since the player is not a passive spectator but rather an active participant. Research suggests that in certain conditions for some people, games may encourage aggressive thought processes and disrespect for others as well as narcissistic preoccupation. Games by the nature of their software construction (especially so-called "first-person shooters") limit options, including leaving out the possibility of nonviolent resolution of conflict.

Violent video games exist alongside other risk factors for violence, such as domestic abuse, peer violence, social dysfunction, failure of self-regulation, and a lack of strong social support systems. Game designers also increasingly blur the distinction between the real and the virtual making it crucial for us to think about how the game's world relates to our shared, embodied existence.

In addition to the concern about violence, there are recent studies indicating that gaming can become addictive.

III. The Churches' Responses

Theological Reflection. Within the Christian tradition, there are many resources available for reflecting creatively and critically about our increasingly fragmented media environments. This has implications for both individual and communal settings. For example, the challenge of texts such as Mary's Song, the Magnificat (Luke 1.46-55), or stories such as The Prodigal Son or within the Sermon on the Mount Jesus' call to his disciples to love their enemies (Matthew 5.44), to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5.38-39) and to leave everything behind to follow him (e.g. Mark 8. 34-38) shed light on critical engagement with media practices, productions and education.

Christian values move us toward community, love and hope. Many media today reinforce autonomy, narcissism, and violence. Love is a commitment to the other, which has implications for how the stranger and outsider are welcomed within and beyond the mediated environments. "Perfect love casts out all fear" (1 John 4.18). The root of all reality is the love of God, reflected as love of others in a wide range of social contexts. Learning to connect with others and to develop

empathy is intrinsic to godliness. Disconnected, self-centered, violent behavior is invariably a move away from such a loving relationship. A theology rooted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth points toward the redeeming love of God. This demands a response. For many this has meant a life devoted to building peace.

Many Christians and church bodies are reflecting critically upon the violence within their own histories as they attempt to engage with the violence permeating different cultures around the world. Some media products suggest that violence is the way to achieve human flourishing. By contrast, as Jesus tells his disciples in the Gospel of John: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you" (John 14.27). Many theologians stress how God's peace is disquieting and unsettling. Participation in God's peace involves judgment and discernment, distinguishing between media which promote violent fragmentation from those which promote peaceful resistance.

Critical Engagement. The prophetic tradition combined with *hesed* - God's covenantal love found in the Hebrew bible – offer a valuable model for engagement with violent media. So also does Paul's challenge to the Philippians to think on that which is "right, true, noble and admirable" (Phil 4.8). As people of goodwill concerned with nurturing human kindness and dignity, the church is in a unique position to challenge the way that the media present their world views. The churches can and should continue to explore and to promote strategies of active and deliberate engagement with a wide range of violent media. The churches have a history of urging caution and skepticism in the consumption of media. For example, there is much to learn from the extended critical reflection about the uses and abuses of icons and images.

Religious leaders can encourage communities and individuals to act as a pressure group to hold the media to a higher standard. Christians can challenge media that promote fear for profit. Churches do well when they encourage their members to make deliberate, careful, healthy choices about how to spend their time and money. These are all 21st century opportunities to express the good news of God's peace.

Reporting. Churches and Christians are often most effective when they avoid prescribing to those who report the news. Christians are at their best when they offer both constructive criticism and thoughtful encouragement rooted in careful listening, respect and humility. Christians can use new Internet based technology to offer alternative perspectives on important current events and issues.

They can support and contribute to media productions that can help to build peace. We can celebrate and emulate those Christians who act as 'salt and light' in their local and national contexts.

Education. Churches and Christians should support educators who contextualize and deconstruct different media. Church leaders can model critical media awareness by providing the larger context for important news stories. There are many resources within different Christian traditions for developing effective media literacy resources and strategies. These can teach how to consider what market and/or ideological conditions may have driven the production of the media production and its worldview. It can help us determine whether military, nationalistic, colonialist, ethnocentric, sexist, racist, uncritically capitalistic, or other agenda are being promoted.

Churches may develop guidelines for protecting children and young people from possible harmful effects of violent media while recognizing that not all exposure to violent entertainment is harmful. In fact some portrayals of violence can teach important lessons.

Research. More scientific, social, and psychological research is needed to understand fully the effects of media, especially violent media, on the people who consume them. The new advances in neuroscience can lend additional insights. There are precedents for the Churches being supportive and contributing to this ongoing research, as well as drawing upon distinctive Christian insights for reframing a range of media.

Community. Christians gather in community. This provides an opportunity for groups to have in-depth and guided discussions to foster critical thinking. Some important topics for Christians to consider include:
- recognition of the humanity of others and how violent media tend to oversimplify the portrayal of others;
- how to cultivate empathy for suffering and how violent media can desensitize us to real suffering;
- the stereotypical portrayal of women in video games / films and real-life work of women for respect and dignity around the world;
- the unfair and incorrect portrayal of minority people;
- the contrast between the real world and the mediated world

Agency. Some forms of media, especially violent video games, encourage a narcissistic sense of power, encouraging the illusion that we humans are more independent than we really are. Accordingly, Christians consuming such media would be well advised to ask themselves what model of agency is depicted and how their own lives may contrast with or reinforce such depicted values.

Desire. Violence prevention and conflict resolution programs may also be developed alongside discussions of popular media. We might acknowledge the fascination of many forms of new media, including violent games, films, and online worlds, and use that self reflection to help uncover the hidden desires that media fulfill. We can then ask ourselves how we could fulfill those desires in healthier, more community-oriented ways.

We must also acknowledge that there are some forms of media that are simply not healthy for Christians or others (especially the young) to consume, due to the degree of violence portrayed or its context. We must be willing to simply say no to some forms of violent media.

Procedural Design. Education about media, especially interactive media like digital games, should also include explanations of how a game's design sets up a set of rules that are often not immediately apparent. Players should understand that games deliberately direct players toward particular perspectives and choices that are pre-determined by the designers. If players don't realize this, then they may implicitly accept dehumanizing and narcissistic world views that may spill over into real-life relationships in indirect but damaging ways.

Socially-Conscious Business. There is a clear need to encourage positive communication with the different media industries, calling them into reflective dialogue. A win-win situation would be the production of common projects such as films that expose injustice, news media coverage that is in-depth and balanced, online role-play experiences in conflict resolution, sponsorship of competitions for youth-produced film project, journalism , or pro-social video games.

Real Violence and Virtual Violence. Like many media consumers, Christians are called upon to distinguish between the imaginary portrayal of violence in entertainment and real acts of violence. The formation of peaceable communities and individuals can contribute towards the prevention of real violent acts in the world. Discussion of media can be directed towards the goal of preventing actual violence.

IV. Conclusion and Recommendations

Engaging with media actively and deliberately is a positive and productive alternative to media violence. Instead of being fearful of media violence, we can frankly acknowledge its appeal and think about how to reframe and respond to it in positive and pro-social ways. For example, we can encourage the use of movies and other media in ways that foster face-to-face social interactions. Instead of accepting violence in media as natural and inevitable, we can think and talk about its implicit values and consequences. We can make a point to watch and talk about media with others. We can protect our children by guiding them through their inevitable exposure to media violence rather than simply trying to shield them from it. Even if we cannot eliminate or avoid the lure of media violence, we can choose how to use it and contextualize it so that it can make a positive contribution to the development of our lives as Christians.

Recommendations

- Celebrate and promote quality media.
- Support, develop and promote education and media literacy initiatives.
- Engage media producers and challenge them to balance their legitimate profit motive with social responsibility.
- Support research to increase our understanding of media's effects, to measure the efficacy of education efforts and to discover new and positive uses of media.
- Use new technology to create and produce positive media.
- Remain engaged in the issue. Media have become our new story tellers and we cannot ignore their power and influence.
- Pray, Care and Hope.