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A Rapid-Fire Surge in PG-13 Violence

By John Horn and Steven Zeitchik

• *High body counts and bloodshed are found in films that are rated a step below R, with firearms at the fore.*

When the first "Die Hard" and "Terminator" movies landed in theaters in the 1980s, both were rated R. But their sequels arrived with PG-13 marks -- even though the level of violence had actually escalated.

Critics have blasted Hollywood's movie ratings for years, claiming that the Motion Picture Assn. of America takes a prudish view of sex and foul language but a very liberal one when it comes to mayhem and bloodshed.

A new report provides strong evidence for that critique, concluding that gunplay has tripled within PG-13 films since 1985, the first full year the rating was used. Last year, PG-13 films were actually more violent than films rated R.

"We were absolutely stunned," said Brad Bushman of Ohio State University, co-author of the report published Monday in *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. "The MPAA website clearly says that R-rated films contain more violence. But PG-13 films now contain significantly more violence than R-rated films."

The MPAA declined to comment. In the past it has defended its rating system, which is cloaked in secrecy and adjudicated by parents and the clergy, citing surveys that prove its popularity and usefulness.

Researchers found that 94% of the highest-grossing films since 1985 had one or more sequences containing violence. Of those 396 films, gunplay has tripled within the PG-13 rating, while it remained flat or declined in films rated G, PG and R.

In addition to quantifying the accelerating levels of violence in blockbuster movies aimed at children and teens, the report also addressed the effect this kind of cinematic bloodshed can have on young moviegoers, which several other investigations have shown can increase hostile behavior.

"The presence of guns in films also provides youth with scripts on how to use guns," the report said. "In addition, children no longer need to go to movie theaters to see films; films are readily available on the Internet or cable. Thus, children much younger than 13 years can easily view films that contain ample gun violence."

Some filmmakers are skeptical about whether to endorse any direct link between violence in movies and hostile behavior.

"American films have always been pretty violent. Whether that translates into violence in society I don't know," said Gus Van Sant, who directed "Elephant," a movie about a deadly high-school shooting.

But MPAA ratings aside, Van Sant said his own compass acts as a check on violence. "I do have a personal feeling, and a fear, as I'm doing a scene that it could contribute to something [violent] in the world, and it does affect how I make a movie."

The study is a follow-up to a February report from the National Science Foundation, which was asked by Congress to review violence in the media in the wake of the Dec. 14, 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

Bushman and fellow researcher Daniel Romer of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania felt they needed to take a closer look at gun violence in movies, studying how those scenes played out in films in specific MPAA ratings. They examined 945 top-grossing films from 1950 to 2012, in which coders identified 17,695 violent sequences. The sequences in which guns were used were tallied separately.

By 2009, the study found, the level of gun violence in PG-13 fare was statistically even with films rated R, but by 2012, PG-13 films were bloodier than the more restrictively rated releases.

The researchers identified several prominent PG-13 films as having high rates of gun violence, including "Inception," "Transformers: Dark of the Moon," and "Mission: Impossible -- Ghost Protocol." One of the most violent films examined was "The Dark Knight," which had 23 segments with violence, 13 involving guns.

The MPAA adopted the PG-13 rating in 1984, which now is used for movies where "some material may be inappropriate for children under 13," after concerns that some PG-rated films were too intense for younger moviegoers. But there is a continuing debate over its application.

Filmmakers have long complained that the R rating is routinely given to films that have fleeting nudity or more than one use of some vulgarities, including such high-minded fare as "The King's Speech," "Bully" and the upcoming Judi Dench drama "Philomena."

But action movies with body counts in the thousands such as this summer's "Man of Steel" get the less restrictive PG-13, which greatly increases the potential audience by allowing teens and children to attend without adults.

Over the years, filmmakers say, the process for getting a movie trimmed down to a PG-13 appears to have grown simpler.

"Years ago I can recall a number of fights with the ratings board where you go back and re-cut and then go back again," said film producer John Davis, whose 2012 thriller "Chronicle" was rated PG-13 for "intense action and violence, thematic material, some language, sexual content and teen drinking." "My experience lately is that you kind of know what you're going to get going in."

While he said some of that may be a function of "clearer communication" between filmmakers and the MPAA, he also noted changing standards in the culture and amid the bodies designed to regulate entertainment. "Look at television and what you see there," Davis said. "Things have definitely changed in terms of what you get on the air."

Some of the increase in violent PG-13 movies may also be a function of economics. Where studios were once content to allow a big summer or holiday movie to go out with an R rating, higher production costs mean studios can't afford to limit their potential audience. So studios nip and tuck until their movies are in just under the PG-13 wire, even if that standard is getting looser.

Three of the year's highest-grossing releases -- "Iron Man 3," "Man of Steel" and "Fast & Furious 6" -- are rated PG-13. Only one R-rated summer action movie ("The Matrix Reloaded") has ever crossed the \$200-million threshold at the domestic box office.

"Violence is increasing in PG-13 films, but so is sexuality and profanity," noted Aris Christofides, editor of Kids-in-mind.com, an independent film rating site. "But the MPAA is not going to change. The MPAA is not an independent organization but is financed and controlled by the movie industry and that's why standards are constantly shifting to accommodate marketing decisions by the movie industry, not moviegoers."

Bushman recommended that the U.S. emulate Europe's model for ratings, which are decided by child development experts, not amateur raters employed by the MPAA. European countries also apply consistent labels from movies to TV shows to video games, unlike the alphabet soup of PG-13, TV-Y7-FV (for television) and E 10+ (video games) here.

"The American system of ratings," he said, "is totally screwed up."

john.horn@latimes.com

steve.zeitchik@latimes.com

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Report Shows Persistence of TV Violence

Study Shows How Newtown Made Little Difference in Violence on Television

By David Bauder

NEW YORK (AP)—Violence, gore and gunplay were staples on prime-time television even in the most sensitive period directly following the Newtown school shooting.

A study of 392 prime-time scripted programs on broadcast networks shown during the month following Vice President Joe Biden's January meeting with entertainment industry executives on the topic revealed that 193 had some incident of violence, according to the Parents Television Council. Some are cartoonish — quite literally, with Homer strangling Bart for mouthing off on "The Simpsons" — but there is plenty of gunplay, stabbings and beat-downs.

Here's a sample of the incidents captured by the PTC between Jan. 11 and Feb. 11:

- A character on ABC's "Body of Proof" says he dreams of ripping a woman's brain out while she's still alive, but he's shot as he's about to stick a hook up her nose. Then he's pushed off a balcony and killed.
- A woman on Fox's "The Following" jams an ice pick into her eye.
- A prison riot episode of CBS' "Hawaii Five-O" includes one man trying to kill someone in a laundry room press, a man snapping someone's neck with his legs and a man injected with something that causes a violent convulsion.
- A man threatens hospital workers on NBC's "Chicago Fire" with a gun before he's disabled with a Taser.
- A gun fight on ABC's "Last Resort" is ignited by one man stabbing another in the abdomen with a screwdriver.
- A man on CBS' "Criminal Minds" is shot dead by the FBI as he tries to cut the eyelids off a gallery owner's face.
- Two characters on Fox's "Bones" wake to find a corpse hanging from the canopy above their bed, dripping blood onto them.
- An already bloody man is dragged into a warehouse on CBS' "The Mentalist," choked to death and thrown in a furnace — all witnessed by a little boy hiding in the building.
- A man writhes in pain on Fox's "Fringe" before a parasite violently bursts out of his body. He's surrounded by the bodies of others who had met the same fate.
- A scene in ABC's "Grey's Anatomy" features a woman's nightmare about sawing her leg, as blood spurts and she screams in pain.
- A gymnastics coach is stabbed several times in the groin on NBC's "Law & Order: SVU."
- A man working on a coffee cart on "The Following" is doused with gasoline and burned alive.
- On CBS' "Blue Bloods," a man aims a gun at a group of children in the park before he is shot dead.
- Even President Grant on ABC's "Scandal" gets into the act, removing an oxygen mask from a woman's face so she suffocates.

Real life has continued to intrude on television entertainment as the months go by. NBC pulled an episode of its serial killer drama "Hannibal" after the Boston Marathon bombing, as did ABC with a "Castle" episode where a character stepped on a pressure-sensitive bomb. Some Newtown parents objected to a recent "Glee" episode that depicted a school shooting.

"I think it is only going to get worse," said Dr. Victor Strasburger, pediatrics professor at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine, who has written frequently on the topic of violence in the media. He said media executives are "not willing to own up to their public health responsibilities."

TV executives are reluctant to talk about violent content, and when pressed question any link between what they air on television and aggressive behavior in real life. Schedules get shifted around when tragic events are in the news, but there's no indication they have changed the types of programs being made. Policy debates have largely overlooked the issue, focusing instead on background checks for gun owners or bans on assault weapons.

In the past, networks have disputed some of the PTC methodology. Some comedic moments are counted as violent episodes in PTC's study when they could be questioned, like a play swordfight on "The Cleveland Show." The PTC doesn't detail the one violent incident it counted on Betty White's "Off Their Rockers," but it's hard to imagine comparing it to the serial killer on "The Following."

"I've had a hard time finding these studies to be very useful to parents or anyone who is looking at this objectively," said Jim Dyke, executive director of TV Watch, a Washington-based advocacy group that opposes government involvement in television programming.

Still, it's a sobering body count.

The parents' group said it found not only an increase in gore from other studies it has conducted over 18 years but a greater specificity and darkness to the violence.

"There has been no accountability, in my opinion, in terms of the degree and amount of violence," said Tim Winter, the parents' group president.

Broadcast networks find themselves squeezed by cable networks that are able to be more explicit in what they show; Dyke, in fact, said it is unfair for a group like the PTC to study broadcast violence and not include what's on cable. There's also a feeling that they're giving viewers what they want. The explosive popularity of AMC's "The Walking Dead" among young viewers has clearly made broadcasters take notice.

Talking about the gore involved in "The Following" shortly before it went on the air this winter, Fox entertainment chief Kevin Reilly said nightmarish scenarios are part of the entertainment menu that a broadcast network needs to provide to its viewers. When a network does this, it must be able to compete with smaller network on an intensity level, he said.

Parents also have the ability to block out programming that they do not want to keep it from their children, the networks' defenders said.

A CBS representative declined comment on the PTC study, while ABC, NBC and Fox did not respond to a request for comment.

"Networks are out to make money and will do whatever it takes to make money," Strasburger said. "When the public health of children comes into conflict with big money, big money always wins."

May represents a turning point for networks, which announce their fall schedules to advertisers in a couple of weeks. The four biggest networks ordered pilots for a total of 44 prospective dramas that they are considering airing sometime in the next season.

Some of them suggest the same issues will persist. Two of ABC's pilots are "Killer Women" and "Murder in Manhattan." Fox is considering series about a family of assassins working for the U.S. government, about a gang member infiltrating a police force and about a person systematically murdering people in the federal witness protection program.

CBS, which already has a lineup heavy on police procedurals, has ordered "Anatomy of Violence," about a psychologist with expertise on sociopaths. NBC's "The Blacklist" is about the world's most wanted criminal and "Hatfields & McCoys" updates the legendary family feud in a modern setting.

ABC is owned by The Walt Disney Co.; NBC is controlled by Comcast Corp.; Fox is owned by News Corp.; CBS is a division of CBS Corp.

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Study: Violent Video Games Increase Aggression

By Dave Larsen

DAYTON, Ohio -- A new Ohio State University study shows that playing violent video games can make people more aggressive over time, but the report's co-author said it is impossible to link such games to violent criminal behavior like the recent Sandy Hook Elementary School shootings.

The new study provides the first experimental evidence that the negative effects of playing violent video games can accumulate over time, said Brad Bushman, an Ohio State professor of communication and psychology who researches factors that can influence aggressive behavior. People who played a violent video game for three consecutive days showed increases in aggressive behavior and hostile expectations each day they played, he said.

Video game publishers are facing growing pressure from Washington and advocacy groups concerned about possible links between violent games and tragedies like the mass shootings in Newtown, Conn., and Aurora, Colo.

The makers of "Grand Theft Auto" announced Friday that the latest chapter in the best-selling crime simulator video game series will be delayed until September.

President Barack Obama last month called for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to renew scientific research into the relationship between "video games, media images and violence." He also urged Congress to support a bill that would grant the CDC \$10 million to conduct this new research.

In a letter to Vice President Joe Biden, Daniel Greenberg of the International Game Developers Association said the nonprofit group would "welcome more evidenced-based research into the effects of our work to add to the large body of existing scientific literature that clearly shows no causal link between video game violence and real violence."

Game companies say their products are protected speech under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, according to the Entertainment Software Association, a trade group that represents U.S. computer and video game publishers. Association officials declined comment for this article.

The video game industry adopted a voluntary rating system in 1994 that limits the sale and rental of games with violent or adult content to customers over ages 17 and 18, respectively.

In June 2011, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that a ban on the sale and rental of "violent" video games to minors is an unconstitutional infringement of speech rights. The ruling said the games are entitled to the same constitutional protection as books, movies, music and other forms of artistic expression.

"Psychological studies purporting to show a connection between exposure to violent video games and harmful effects on children do not prove that such exposure causes minors to act aggressively," Justice Antonin Scalia wrote in the majority opinion.

The Ohio State study, conducted by Bushman with fellow researchers in France and Germany, involved 70 French university students who were told they would be participating in a three-day study of the effects of brightness of video games on visual perception.

The students were then randomly assigned to play a violent or nonviolent video game for 20 minutes on each of three consecutive days. After playing the game each day, participants took part in several exercises that measured

their hostile expectations and aggression.

People who played the violent video games expected others to behave aggressively and were more likely to respond with aggression themselves, Bushman said. Students who played the nonviolent games showed no changes in either their hostile expectations or their aggression.

"There is a difference on day one: Violent video game players are more aggressive," Bushman said. "The difference is even bigger on day two, and on day three it is bigger still."

Testing players for longer periods of time isn't practical or ethical, he said.

Bushman's research also showed that violent video games decrease pro-social behavior, such as helping or cooperating with others, and decrease feelings of empathy and compassion for others.

"It is impossible to know whether playing violent video games causes violent criminal behavior such as the Newtown shootings, because in our laboratory experiments we can't give people guns to see if they shoot each other with them," he said.

Violent criminal behavior is complicated and determined by many factors, "often in combination," Bushman said.

"Violent media is not the only factor that contributes to aggression and violence, but at least it is one we can do something about" by controlling the media that children are exposed to, Bushman said.

Consumers spent \$24.7 billion on video games, hardware and accessories in 2011, according to the research firm NPD Group. U.S. video game software sales reached \$8.8 billion and computer game sales were \$450 million.

The video game industry supports 120,000 direct and indirect jobs with an average salary of \$90,000, according to the Entertainment Software Association.

Five of the 10 best-selling video games of 2012 featured violent content, according to a year-end sales report by NPD Group. They included such titles as "Call of Duty: Black Ops II," "Halo 4," "Assassin's Creed III," "Borderlands 2" and "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3."

VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY BY THE NUMBERS

The average U.S. household owns at least one dedicated game console, PC or smartphone

Average game player age: 30

Average game buyer age: 35

Amount consumers spent on video games, hardware and accessories in 2011: \$24.7 billion

Total amount taxpayers have repaid the entertainment software industry for its legal fees: \$2.1 million

Source: Entertainment Software Association

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Censorship Is Not the Solution to Violence

By Scott Forsyth

Two more shooting deaths, this time of first responders. Again, what a tragedy. We ask ourselves -- why? Some folks think they know the answer. It is the media.

Allegedly persons who view depictions of violence in the media are more likely to act violently in the real world. Specially vulnerable are children and specially evil are video games.

The critics want the media to censor themselves more or for government to be the censor. These actions may satisfy our desire for solutions, but they are built on false premises and run afoul of the First Amendment.

Before I explain, let me repeat: What happened in Newtown and Webster and the killings which happen all too frequently on the streets of Rochester and other urban centers are horrible. But, to paraphrase a lesson learned in law school, bad facts can lead to bad law.

For starters, ~~without a mind-reading device, it's virtually impossible to identify a causal link between exposure to media and any kind of action in the real world.~~ Some psychologists purport to find a causal link and some do not. At best there is evidence of a correlation between viewing violence and acting aggressively. And correlation, as everybody should know, is not causation.

Second, everybody views depictions of violence in the media and some people view lots of depictions. Still many of us lead peaceful lives and many within the subclass of frequent viewers of media violence do not commit violent acts.

The science aside, any government plan to restrict access to depictions of violence by the media butts heads with the First Amendment.

Eighteen months ago the Supreme Court struck down a California statute that prohibited the sale or rental of "violent video games" to minors, *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Assn.*, 564 U.S. (2011).

The statute targeted games wherein a player has the option of "killing, maiming, dismembering, or sexually assaulting an image of a human being." The statute tracked obscenity laws, exempting games having a "serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value for minors."

Justice Scalia wrote the opinion. He made much of the fact video games are not uniquely violent. He reminded us "Grimm's Fairy Tales," the "Odyssey," the "Inferno," and notably the "Lord of the Flies" are brutal classics.

We do not have a tradition of restricting children's access to depictions of violence, he noted. Just the opposite. We hold "basic" the principle that government lacks "the power to restrict expression because of its message, its subject matter, or its content," *Ashcroft v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 535 U.S. 564, 573 (2002). There are a few limited exceptions, such as obscenity, incitement, fighting words and child pornography, none of which applied.

A legislature cannot create new exceptions for speech it deems too harmful to tolerate. Nor can a legislature suppress otherwise protected speech by borrowing language from an exception. Justice Scalia then gave the statute the kiss of death by analyzing it under strict scrutiny.

Twelve months earlier the Supreme Court invalidated a federal law that criminalized the creation, possession and sale of depictions of animal cruelty or "crush videos," *United States v. Stevens*, 559 U.S. (2010). The law restricted speech based on its content and did not fall into any of the exceptions. The court emphasized we do not have any

tradition of forbidding the depiction of animal cruelty, though states have long had laws against committing animal cruelty.

If government cannot regulate the sale of violent video games to minors and the possession of crush videos, it cannot regulate general depictions of violence, no matter how distasteful the depictions may be.

It may seem counterintuitive but what a person views does not necessarily cause him to act violently. Let us not blame the media, because doing so leads to talk of censorship, a truly false solution.

Scott Forsyth is a partner in Forsyth & Forsyth and serves as counsel to the local chapter of the ACLU. He may be contacted at (585) 262-3400 or scott@forsythlawfirm.com.

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