

TELEVISION AND VIOLENCE

Violence on television is an important and politicized issue. The nature and level of violence on television varies tremendously across countries and across cultures. The issue of violence on television raises questions about censorship and government imposed restrictions on the media. Should restrictions be placed on the media like television? If so, is media censorship necessary? Why would censorship - the suppression of speech - be a good thing in a democratic society? These questions, and many more, will be explored with respect to television and violence, and the controversial topic of media censorship.

Seeking to explore the relationship between television and violence, this essay will begin with a look at violence across countries and across cultures. The relationship between violence and television will be discussed then we turn to a discussion of media censorship, particularly how it relates to violence on TV. This research paper will then conclude with a summary of the findings and an analysis of the research

Relationship between Television and Violence

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Television is everywhere and has spread to all four corners of the globe. Much like television, violence is a universal phenomenon found all over the world. Violence on TV however is a relatively new concept and is not found across the world. Restrictions placed on violence in the media are culturally-specific and not universal. The result is that violence on television is common in some parts of the world while uncommon in others. In Canada and the United States, restrictions on television are usually not too strong and generally related to violent content or things that are considered to be obscene (generally sex). A good example of this in North America was Janet Jackson's infamous "wardrobe malfunction", in which her left breast was fully exposed during Super Bowl Sunday, the most-watched television event in the United States. Apparently more than 90 million viewers had a fleeting glimpse of the singer's breast and "about 542,000 complaints were received by broadcaster CBS" (British Broadcasting Corporation 2008) following the incident. Accordingly, broadcaster CBS was initially fined \$550,000 for indecency and obscenity. In other places in the world, China and the countries of Asia in particular, restrictions are placed more strongly on violence, obscenity and also things which are considered to be too political. Again, violence and its availability on television varies across the world and depends on different attitudes towards violence. There are also beliefs that violence on television makes people violent and desensitizes people to general violence.

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Children in particular are seen as being prone to excessive violence and a common belief is that they should be sheltered from violent TV. Because of this belief, censorship of television is common around the world (British Broadcasting Corporation 2008).

Why Censorship?

Should restrictions be placed on the media like television? If so, is media censorship necessary? Censorship is the suppression of speech and is generally conceived of as something which is negative. Since television is a form of media, it is considered to be speech. Utilitarian theory provides the best theoretical reasons for why violence on television may be censored.

Utilitarianism is a set of beliefs which argues that the morality of an action is determined by that action's overall contribution to utility. Thus, utility is incredibly important for utilitarians who argue that the worthiness of an action is the result of its outcome, intended or not. A stream of consequentialism, utilitarian theory looks at actions and their consequences when making a judgment about the morality of the act. The most famous utilitarians were Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill and a common concept attributed to their line of thought is the notion that the "greatest good for the greatest number of people" determines

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the morality of an action. The moral worth of an action is incredibly important for utilitarians and this worth is derived from its consequences. If we relate utilitarian thought to censorship and the media, there may be some reasons why society – as a whole or group – may want to limit certain types of media. If there is a communal desire to limit shield a segment of society, i.e. children, from violence on television then utilitarian theory says that censorship would be a necessary restriction if it benefits the greater social good (Lyons 1965; Blackwell 2003).

Concluding Remarks

Television is universal but violence on TV is culturally specific and varies across cultures. North American culture tends to have looser restrictions on violent content while Asian countries generally tend to restrict more media, including violent depictions on television. Censorship is common in all parts of the world and television can be censored due to obscene content or excessive violence. Freedom of expression is important but this freedom is not absolute. Restrictions sometimes need to be placed on certain types of speech. Society has an interest in protecting its members from speech is sometimes too violent or promotes the corruption of vulnerable members of society (especially children). All in all, censorship of television is necessary but we must remember to use censorship sparingly and in good measure.

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