

## Conference Proposal

### Understanding the Impact of Media Violence Exposure on Aggression: Antecedents, Consequences, and Underlying Processes

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*Venue:* Inselhotel Hermannswerder, Potsdam, Germany

*Dates:* 31 May to 3 June 2007

#### 1. Background

Few issues have generated more controversy in recent years than the question of whether viewing violent media contents makes viewers more aggressive. Persistent denial of harmful effects from the media industry and some social and communication scientists (e.g., Ferguson, 2002; Jones, 2002) stands in contrast to a growing body of evidence showing that exposure to violent media content has the potential to create and/or increase aggressive thoughts, feelings, and behaviors and to reduce prosocial behavior. This evidence, summarized in several recent meta-analyses and reviews, leads to the following conclusions (e.g., Anderson et al., 2003; Browne & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005; Gentile, 2003; Kirsh, 2006; Klimmt & Trepte, 2003; Möller, 2006):

(1) Short-term exposure to media violence in experimental studies reliably leads to an increase in aggressive cognitions, affect, and behavior compared to exposure to nonviolent media content.

(2) Long-term, habitual exposure over time, as assessed in longitudinal studies, contributes to the development of aggressive scripts and also leads to an increase in aggressive behavior patterns, particularly in childhood and adolescence.

(3) Exposure to media violence is clearly not the only contributory factor to aggressive behavior, but the magnitude of its effects is not trivial (Rosenthal, 1990).

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Indeed, it is equal to or higher than that of other major risk factors for adverse outcomes against which society has long been taking action, such as unprotected sex as a risk factor for HIV infection (Bushman & Huesmann 2001).

(4) In contrast to the consistent evidence that media violence is a risk factor for aggression, the underlying processes involved in this relationship are less well understood. Social cognition and developmental theory suggest that different processes explain short-term (priming, arousal) vs. long-term (social learning, habituation) effects of exposure to media violence (Bushman & Huesmann, 2006). However, evidence supporting these explanations is still limited.

(5) There is a shortage of research addressing the crucial question why media violence is highly attractive to viewers and what variables are associated with individual differences in the propensity to watch media violence (Kirsh, 2006).

(6) Furthermore, research into the media violence-aggression link has not yet progressed substantially beyond the stage of diagnosis, despite the need to develop intervention strategies to reduce both exposure to media violence and vulnerability to its aggression-enhancing effects.

(7) The vast majority of studies exploring the media violence-aggression link have been conducted in the United States. Therefore, evidence on the role of culture, for example in terms of differences in the amount of media consumption and the level of violence in media available to the public, is limited. Furthermore, it is generally accepted that media violence interacts with other factors, such as level of real life violence, that may vary considerably across cultures but that have not yet been systematically investigated.

(8) Finally, it is important to note that there is considerable variance at the level of individual studies as to the strength of the media violence-aggression link, pointing to the need of identifying variables that moderate the relationship.

Compared to more than five decades of research in the United States, systematic investigations into the link between media violence and aggression have been few and far between in Germany and other European countries. Available evidence has focused on the amount and nature of violent content in different media, most notably television (e.g., Grimm & Weiss, 2005; Groebel & Gleich, 1993, see also Groebel, 1999). Only few published studies have explored the impact of media violence exposure on aggressive cognition, affect, and behavior. However, teams of media researchers and

psychologists have begun pursuing this line of research in Germany in recent years, and the proposed conference is designed to promote exchange and collaboration with the international research community on media violence.

Gaining a clearer understanding of the link between exposure to media violence and aggression is essential for a number of reasons. From a basic science point of view, it is important to understand the role of violent media content as a contributory factor to aggressive behavior and to identify the critical mechanisms and processes that can explain when and why the effect comes about. From an applied perspective, it is vital to be able to assess the potential for harm entailed in the availability of violent media contents for recipients in general as well as vulnerable groups in particular, such as young children or individuals with a high level of trait aggressiveness. Finally, from a policy making point of view, sound empirical evidence is required about the potentially harmful effects of media violence to determine whether there is a case for restricting the availability of violent media contents, given that it has to be carefully balanced against the basic right of freedom of expression deeply engrained in the value system of democratic societies.

The proposed conference is designed to bring together an interdisciplinary group of researchers from five countries (Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United States) who have been promoting research on media violence on aggression over different lengths of time. Some of them have been collaborating in smaller groups in the past. The proposed conference will be unique in bringing together the most active scholars in this domain working on the basis of state-of-the-art methodologies.

## **2. Aims of the Conference**

The aim of the conference is to create a forum for researchers on media violence to present and discuss their work with explicit reference to a predefined set of questions. The conference is designed to contribute new perspectives to these questions and develop an agenda for future collaborative research at an international level. In particular, the following issues will be addressed:

*Theoretical Issues:*

\* Mediating processes in the short-term effects of media violence: What are the immediate cognitive and affective responses to media violence that may promote aggressive behavior?

\* Mediating processes in the long-term effects: What changes in affect and cognition are brought about by the continuous exposure to media violence?

\* Moderators of short-term effects: What factors can buffer or attenuate the effects of media violence, e.g., passive watching versus active play?

\* Moderators of the long-term effects: Who is particularly susceptible to the effects of habitual exposure to media violence, are there sensitive developmental periods, and is there something like resilience to the adverse effects of media violence?

\* Gender-related effects: Are there different effects for girls and boys and do girls and boys who use violent media extensively differ in terms of personality traits or environmental factors (family background, deviant peers)?

\* Generality vs. specificity of adverse effects: Are the observed effects on aggression specific to *violent* media exposure (as opposed to high-intensity media usage in general)? Does media violence, which is mostly physical in nature, only affect the tendency toward physical aggression or does it transfer effects to other forms, such as relational and verbal aggression, and to (reduced) prosocial behavior? How does media violence exposure affect memory, not just for violent content but also for content presented in the context of violence? Are there potential positive outcomes of media violence exposure?

\* The role of culture: Are differences between countries in media violence level and intensity of consumption related to differences in the strength of the link between media violence and aggression?

*Methodological Issues:*

\* How can experiments and observational non-experimental studies best be used to complement each other and add to our theoretical understanding?

\* What are the best advanced statistical methods to use in attempting to draw causal influences out of longitudinal non-experimental studies?

\* What are reliable, valid and practical/economical measures of ...

- media violence exposure - convergence of different methodologies

- aggressive behavior – reactive-proactive; direct-indirect

- aggressive affect – relation of self-reports and physiological measures
- aggressive cognitions, e.g., hostile information processing?

\* How to deal with the ethical issues involved, e.g., in the exposure of children and adolescents to violent media contents in the context of experimental studies?

*Attraction to Media Violence:*

\* What are the form and content elements in violent media that make them attractive to youth?

\* What is it that violent media offer to users that nonviolent media are less able to provide?

\* Are there particular groups of consumers who show a greater preference for violent content, and what variables characterize these groups?

*Interventions:*

\* Is it more effective to aim an intervention at reducing 'exposure' to media violence or at 'breaking the connection' between exposure and the subsequent aggressive behavior?

\* Are schools or parents a more effective instrument to use in delivering an intervention?

\* Are interventions aimed at 'breaking the connection' more effective if they target behaviors or cognitions?

*Policy Implications:*

\* What should be the role of social scientists investigating the aggression-enhancing effects of media violence in the public debate about the issue?

\* What lessons can be learned from the international participants for greater involvement in social advocacy of media violence researchers in Germany?

### **3. Dissemination of Results**

The results of the conference will be disseminated in suitable formats both to the scientific community and the interested public. For the *research community*, possible forms of dissemination will be discussed at the workshop and could include a Special Issue in a leading journal as well as symposia at international conferences, e.g., the

2008 International Congress of Psychology as well as the next meetings of the International Society for Research on Aggression (ISRA) and the International Communication Association (ICA). In addition, the conclusions reached at the workshop will be disseminated to a wider, nonacademic audience via the media. The exact format will be negotiated with media representatives once funding is secured. At this stage, a press conference is planned at the end of the conference with all participants. This event will be supported by the press office of the University of Potsdam. Given the widespread interest in the subject and the unique chance of meeting the leading international scholars on media violence in Potsdam, we anticipate a significant interest from the press.

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