What culture of violence? Why we shouldn't blame video games and movies

Does consuming violent media lead to a greater propensity toward violence? If anything, the data points in the opposite direction.

by Scott R. Paeth in the April 17, 2013 issue

Violence seems to be embedded in our DNA. For as long as there have been human beings, there has been violence. Humans are adept at brutality. And for those of us who hope for an end to violence and believe in a God who desires that we beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks, the ever-lengthening account of human slaughter and the ever-growing list of victims can be a temptation to despair.

The mass killing of first-graders and their teachers at Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, last December may represent a watershed moment in the public perception of violence and the search for solutions to the problem of mass shootings. But the problems of violence extend beyond mass killings like the one at Sandy Hook. In my city of Chicago, the murder rate is topping all past records, with most of the killing taking place in a small number of high-crime, high-poverty neighborhoods. One recent victim was a young woman who had performed at Barack Obama's second inauguration.

As in the past, a great deal of attention is being paid to the idea that we are awash in a "culture of violence," which extends to every sphere of society, including the television shows we watch, the movies we view, the books we read and the games we play. The condemnation of violent culture is one theme that unites the National Rifle Association's Wayne LaPierre and President Obama, who in a speech in the aftermath of Sandy Hook criticized "a culture that all too often glorifies violence."

The search for causes is understandable. But it is not at all clear that a "culture of violence" is responsible. Violence as a social phenomenon is far too complex to be traced to so amorphous a source or to any single set of causes.

There is no question that we are surrounded in popular media by depictions of violence, from *The Walking Dead* and the *Call of Duty* games to Quentin Tarantino's film *Django Unchained*. Nevertheless, we should be wary of attempting to extrapolate from that fact to the conclusion that the *depiction* of violence can be causally tied to the commission of *actual* violence. The data do not support the idea that the consumption of violent media leads to a greater propensity toward violence. If anything, they point in the opposite direction.

For example, the *New York Times* recently reported on one study that found a correlation between higher violent video game sales and lower rates of violent crime. In addition, violent media are popular in many other countries that exhibit far less violence than the United States does; if there were a connection between violent media and real-life violence, one would expect there to be a correlation in rates of violence across national boundaries—but there is not. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, factors such as poverty, drugs and involvement in crime are far better predictors of a propensity to actual violence than consumption of violent media.

Interestingly, despite our renewed focus on the problem of violence, it is not even clear that it is increasing, despite horrific acts like Sandy Hook. To the contrary, overall violence has declined in the United States over the past five years. Since 2010 it is down 3.8 percent, according to FBI statistics. What has increased has been the incidence of mass shootings. According to *Mother Jones* magazine, there have been at least 62 mass shootings in the past 30 years. The horror of these acts and the publicity they garner can give the impression that violence overall is on the rise. But this does not appear to be the case. As a society, we seem to be getting less violent even as the depiction of violence in media becomes more graphic and

realistic.

The focus on violent media allows us to become distracted from examining what the underlying causes and cures of violence might be. It is comforting to think that we can point to a single phenomenon at the root of the motivation to harm and kill. But, as Anthony Burgess would note, human beings are not clockwork oranges. We are not simple machines whose workings can be taken apart, understood and then reconstructed to function better. At the heart of Christian teaching is the realization that we are in some sense fundamentally broken creatures, sinners in need of redemption from a transcendent source. We are mysteries to ourselves, and neither our motivations nor our actions can be well understood if we believe ourselves to be mere mechanisms or creatures governed by conditions of stimulus and response.

Stephen King, who knows something about both the portrayal of violence in media and the way it can feed fatal delusions, writes that media violence can be an accelerant for mass killings. While not itself the cause, it can catalyze the fuel that exists within the troubled imagination of a potential killer. Like gasoline and oily rags, we should strive to keep violent media away from those who might use it as inspiration for actual violence—if only we could figure out who those people are.

But part of the problem here is that all sorts of cultural factors are implicated in people's response to and evaluation of violence. One study found an increase in aggression in people playing violent video games, but it also found a similar increase in people who read a violent Bible story. The researchers in this case were quick to recommend limitations on violent media but reluctant to limit reading the Bible.

A more effective approach, I suspect, would be to contain the potential damage done by the confluence of violent media and violent intentions by depriving the fire of its power to burn. This would entail imposing tighter restrictions on the availability of certain kinds of firearms and ammunition. Universal background checks for weapon purchases, a ban on high-capacity magazines and other limitations on guns would represent a good start, but those would be far from the only reforms necessary.

The connections between poverty, crime and violence are exceptionally strong and underscore the need to address poverty. To begin beating our spears into pruning hooks, we need first to ensure that the fruits of the harvest are available to all. Giving those on the margins of society greater hope in their future will have a greater effect on reducing violence overall than any restriction on violent media will.