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Media Influence on Youth: Scientific Evidence, Policy Considerations, and the History of Media Self-Regulation

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Our society's concern that mass media might detrimentally affect our youth is punctuated throughout recent history. In the 1920s, a wealthy mother named Frances Payne Bolton was concerned about how pulp fiction might negatively influence young women. Thus, she funded the Payne Fund Studies (1927-1932), which examined popular movies in an early attempt to understand what depictions of violence, sex, and social propaganda did to young peoples' minds.¹ These studies informed the development of the Motion Picture Production Code, or Hays Code, named after Hollywood censor Will H. Hays. This code constituted the first industry-enforced censorship that Hollywood's film censors used to determine what content was and was not acceptable for public consumption.² Worthy of note, the Payne Fund Studies lacked methodological rigor, so although their industry influence can still be seen in the current film rating system, the studies have been seriously questioned by the social sciences.¹

Fast-forward to 1985. The Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) is newly-formed and pushing for legislation to protect young listeners from explicit lyrics in popular music. Like the Payne Fund Studies, this effort was initiated because of concerns parents had over the safety of their children. Tipper Gore, wife of then-senator Al Gore and mother of four children, co-founded the Center along with three other mothers with strong connections in Washington, D.C. Similar to the Payne Fund Studies, the PMRC successfully compelled the music industry to self-impose a parental advisory label indicating the acceptability of a record's lyrics for public consumption. A third similarity between this and the Payne Fund experience is that no rigorous, direct evidence was provided to illustrate that explicit lyrics caused violent or sexually reckless behaviors. Rather, respected scholars in music and psychiatry testified about the amount of attention young people might pay to music, as well as how music might influence their development.³

Today, we have the V-chip, a technology incorporated into every new television sold in the United States since 2000 that relies on a rating system television programmers have imposed on themselves in lieu of government censorship.⁴ The V-chip technology is easy to ignore; viewers do not need to use the chip's program blocking function. However, television program ratings associated with the chip (TV-MA, TV-PG, TV-14, TV-G, TV-Y7, and TV-Y) should be familiar to anyone who watches network or cable channels. Interestingly, the television rating system exceeds in rigor the film industry's Hays Code successor, the MPAA rating system of XX, X, R, PG-13, PG, and G. The television system also codes content for depictions of violence ("V"), sexual situations ("S"), coarse

language (“L”), and suggestive dialogue (“D”). This additional level of program description suggests an acknowledgement of differing negative effects of specific kinds of content, as opposed to treating sex and violence as similarly negative.

A major strength of Northup’s article, “Examining the Relationship between Media Use and Aggression, Sexuality, and Body Image,” is that various measures of media use are compared with specific outcomes relating to violence and sex, thus isolating rather than overgeneralizing media influence. The usual estimates of time spent in front of the television, video games, and the Internet are, of course, present. However, Northup also assesses the use of specific genres of content, and in the case of media sex, he asks about early use, as well as current use of pornography. This particular differentiation between stages of pornography use is very important, given Northup’s finding that the age of first pornography use appears to predict a pattern of habitual use that ultimately relates to troubling sexual outcomes.

Another strength of Northup’s article is that his sample of emerging adults is not treated in general terms. Much of the evidence applied toward policy action has tended to describe overall negative effects of mass media use, treating media users as a homogenous group.^{2,3} Northup uses a sample robust enough to examine the relationship of media use on aggression, sexuality, and body image for men, for women, and for specific race/ethnic groups. Thus, we are able to see that video games rather than television use correlates with aggression for young men, whereas television use rather than video game use correlates with aggression for young women. Interesting differences regarding media use also emerge based on whether the young adult is Caucasian, African-American, or Hispanic. These findings are important additions to the conversation of media influence and warrant further investigation.

The constellation of relationships Northup discovers has serious implications for understanding media influences, in that neither media diets nor demographic makeup of young audiences should be reduced to generalizations. From a theory perspective, this research echoes the lessons learned in recent work commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation and the RAND Corporation that media use varies based on the user’s biological sex and race/ethnicity.⁵⁻⁷ Thus, it is logical that if media use varies based on the user’s characteristics, the potential impact of media on violence and sex outcomes will accordingly vary based on the type of media consumed. In essence, Northup’s article in conjunction with recent work conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation constitutes a call

for more specified research questions that go beyond predictions based on overall media exposure.

Policymakers would also do well to avoid blanket assumptions about media use, instead working to target specific types of media for analysis and keeping in mind First Amendment protections that prohibit overbroad rules of censorship.⁸ As media use becomes even more fragmented, for example with increased use of online and on-demand content, overbroad policy is likely to become even more of a danger, as the population segment most affected by any one type of content will almost certainly decrease. We must provide policymakers with the most rigorous examination of media influences on youth at different developmental stages, as well as examine different demographic and socio-economic groups, to assist in determining which media are most problematic in the formation of harmful attitudes and behaviors.

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