



Doc. 13509

06 May 2014

Violence in and through the media

Report¹

Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media

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Summary

The media play a major role in the daily life of modern societies. While it is difficult to prove a direct causality between the exposure of a person to a violent media service or product and a subsequent act of aggression or violence by that person, the general impact of media violence on the behaviour of individuals and societies as a whole cannot be denied.

Measures applied by public authorities against media violence need to be prescribed by law and justified in a democratic society. In this context, any incitement to violence through the media, as well as the production, public display, sale and possession of media with gratuitous violence which violates human dignity, shall be prohibited. Those who produce media in which violence plays a central part should be obliged to indicate publicly the type, level and quantity of violence of such media. Providers of media services or products should be required to provide hotlines or other public complaint mechanisms which can be contacted if difficulties are experienced with violent media content or violence through the media.

It is recommended that the Committee of Ministers instigate the preparation of practical guidance for parents, teachers and providers of media services and products on how to deal with the effects of media violence on individuals and society as a whole and how to counteract its potential impact.

1. Reference to committee: [Doc. 12858](#), Reference 3851 of 23 April 2012.



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A. Draft resolution²

1. The Parliamentary Assembly notes that the media play a major role in the daily life of modern societies. In this context, it is alarming that incidents of extreme violence have been perpetrated by individuals who had intensive prior exposure to violent media. It is therefore of utmost importance for democratic societies to address this correlation adequately.
2. Over the last decade, the media landscape has changed due to the enormous growth of the Internet and online media. The latter, and a convergence of traditional media with social online media with user-to-user content, have created new forms of media violence. Existing policies and regulations regarding media violence therefore face challenges both legally and in practical terms.
3. Violence in and through the media can take different forms, ranging from the implied or verbal to the depiction of psychological or physical violence, including sexual. Such violence can be targeted at fictional characters or human beings, with the distinction between the two categories being blurred by technological advances in computer-animated images. The interactivity of computer games and Internet media provides possibilities for users to actively steer violence in and through the media and thus identify with such violence.
4. A particularly serious aspect of these developments is media incitement to violence, namely the advocacy of violent behaviour through a media product or service. Cyber bullying is a form of inter-personal aggression which uses the Internet and mobile phones as weapons, but may be a consequence of incitement to violence through the media. Together with other contributory factors, such aggression might also lead to self-aggression or suicide.
5. The perception of violence may differ among individuals and societies and may evolve over time, but it is generally recognised in Europe that freedom of expression and information under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5) applies neither to child pornography nor to hate speech.
6. In order to address media violence adequately, all stakeholders need to recognise and assume their respective responsibilities. States have the obligation to combat illegal forms of media violence, protect minors against the harmful effects of media violence and ensure access of users to information about the violence of a media service or product. The producers, and in particular commercial producers, of violent media bear editorial and commercial responsibility. Users, as well as parents of young users, are also responsible for such use.
7. While it is difficult to prove a direct causality between the exposure of a person to a violent media service or product and a subsequent act of aggression or violence by that person, the general impact of media violence on the behaviour of individuals and societies as a whole cannot be denied. Commercial producers of violent media content bear a social responsibility for combating violence in society. Strict licensing requirements, higher transparency obligations or dissuasive fiscal measures may therefore be appropriate under these circumstances.
8. Measures applied by public authorities against media violence need to be prescribed by law and justified in a democratic society. They must not be used to curb political opposition or otherwise violate the right to freedom of expression and information under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights. News and current affairs media need to report on acts of violence, but should respect the rights of victims depicted in such media as well as the rights of children viewing them.
9. The Assembly therefore resolves that national parliaments, governments of member States and media providers have a duty to protect against media violence on the basis of the following principles:
 - 9.1. any incitement to violence through the media shall be prohibited by law in accordance with Article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights; the direct use of media in order to inflict psychological violence upon others, such as through cyber bullying, should be prohibited by law;
 - 9.2. the production, public display, sale and possession of media with gratuitous violence which violates human dignity shall be punishable by law; human dignity is at stake if a human being is prominently portrayed in a dehumanised way as a legitimate object of explicit and gratuitous physical, psychological or sexual violence and suffering;

2. Draft resolution adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 April 2014.

- 9.3. the production, public display and sale of violent media content which is likely to impair the physical, mental or moral development of children and adolescents shall be restricted under the domestic law of member States; national regulations shall take due account of the fact that the access to such media content requires prior age verification of users;
 - 9.4. those who produce media in which violence plays a central part should be obliged by law to indicate publicly the type, level and quantity of violence of such media; authors of violent media content should identify themselves or be traceable through the editors of media or the providers of media services or products, unless the latter bear legal responsibility for such content;
 - 9.5. the providers of media services or products (such as broadcasters, Internet access or service providers, providers of mobile telecommunications media as well as sellers of videos, games or print media) must ensure that all media services or products which are knowingly made accessible through them indicate publicly the level and type of violence they contain, if violence plays a central part of the content;
 - 9.6. the providers of media services or products should be required to provide hotlines or other public complaint mechanisms, which can be used if difficulties are experienced with violent media content or violence through the media; complaint mechanisms should be complemented by a code of conduct regarding media violence, which includes content rating and access restrictions as well as co-operation with law-enforcement authorities in case of potentially illegal content;
 - 9.7. the producers of media reception devices (such as television sets, video players, audiovisual mobile communication devices, personal computers or smart phones) should be encouraged to provide built-in or free-of-charge add-on technical equipment to filter violent content in accordance with standardised indicators of such content; parents should be made aware of the availability of such filtering for the protection of their children; for this purpose, user-friendly manuals, made available free-of-charge upon request, should contain relevant information and guidance.
10. The Assembly recommends that member States:
 - 10.1. create, in co-operation with media companies and media professionals, organisations which rate media violence, develop measures for the protection against media violence and monitor compliance with such measures; where such organisations do not exist, public regulatory authorities should have such competences in member States;
 - 10.2. criminalise the production, distribution and possession of violent and extreme pornography;
 - 10.3. provide education about media violence in school curricula and in teacher training programmes.
 11. The Assembly invites:
 - 11.1. media professionals to develop, through their professional organisations, a code of conduct for journalists, photographers and editors dealing with violent media content;
 - 11.2. the European Broadcasting Union and the Association of Commercial Television in Europe to fully address the problem of media violence in the context of connected television, that is television sets with Internet access.

B. Draft recommendation³

1. Referring to its Resolution ... (2014) on violence in and through the media, the Parliamentary Assembly welcomes and encourages member States to actively support the Council of Europe's youth campaign against hate speech online.
2. As violent media services and products are produced throughout Europe, including in countries which are not members of the European Union, the Council of Europe is the correct and appropriate authority to address this subject from a European perspective, based on Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5), which sets the standards for all 47 member States of the Council of Europe.
3. Recalling the important legal and political guidance provided by the Committee of Ministers in its Recommendation No. R (97) 19 on the portrayal of violence in the electronic media, as well as Recommendation No. R (89) 7 concerning principles on the distribution of videograms having a violent, brutal or pornographic content, the Assembly believes that further work is necessary in this field.
4. The Assembly therefore recommends that the Committee of Ministers:
 - 4.1. instigate the preparation of practical guidance to parents, teachers and providers of media services and products on how to deal with the effects of media violence on individuals and society as a whole and how to counteract its potential impact;
 - 4.2. assess the feasibility of ensuring, possibly in co-operation with the European Union and UNESCO, the standardised rating of violent content by the producers and access providers of such content throughout Europe and beyond;
 - 4.3. call on governments of member States to forward this recommendation and Resolution ... (2014) on violence in and through the media to their domestic regulatory authorities and public service broadcasters.

3. Draft recommendation adopted unanimously by the committee on 7 April 2014.

C. Explanatory memorandum by Sir Roger Gale, rapporteur

1. Introduction

1. Following the motion for a resolution on violence on television and its consequences on children ([Doc. 12858](#)), I was appointed rapporteur of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media on 23 January 2013. Subsequently, I suggested a change of title to “Violence in and through the media”, as television could be considered too narrow for such a report in the current media landscape.
2. The debate about media violence is as old as the media. Twenty years ago, the 4th European Ministerial Conference on Mass Media Policy (Prague, 7-8 December 1994) addressed to the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe an Action plan containing strategies for the promotion of the media in a democratic society, in which they requested that the Committee of Ministers “prepare, in close consultation with media professionals and regulatory authorities, possible guidelines on the portrayal of violence in the media”. As the media have changed over time and especially over the past decade, it is timely to revisit this subject.
3. Widely publicised acts of extreme violence by individuals, who have usually had exposure to violent media, regularly puts this subject high on the political agenda. Public debate arose, for instance, after the shootings at a high school in Columbine, Colorado (United States) in 1999, at a high school in Erfurt (Germany) in 2002, at a vocational college in Kauhajoki (Finland) in 2008, at a secondary school in Winnenden (Germany) in 2009, at a Jewish school in Toulouse (France) in 2012 and, most recently, at School No. 263 in Moscow (Russia) in February 2014, as well as the bomb attack in Oslo and the shooting massacre in Buskerud (Norway) in 2011.
4. The Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media held a hearing on “Violence in audiovisual media and its consequences on children and society” hosted by the Committee on Culture, Education and Communication of the French Senate on 18 December 2012 in Paris.⁴ Expert reports were heard by Professor Divina Frau-Meigs, University of Paris III, Professor Jo Groebel, Scientific Director of the UNESCO Study on Media Violence of 1998 (Berlin), Mr Giacomo Mazzone, European Broadcasting Union (Grand-Saconnex/Geneva), Dr Salome Ramos, psychologist (Aveiro, Portugal), and Dr Astrid Zipfel, Institute for Communication and Media Science, Heinrich Heine University (Düsseldorf).
5. On 21 May 2013, the committee held a hearing on this subject at the House of Commons in London. The committee heard Mr John Carr, Member of the Executive Board of the UK Council on Child Internet Safety (London), Ms Tineke Lodders-Elfferich, President of the Board, and Mr Wim Bekkers, Director of the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Media (NICAM) (Hilversum), Mr David Austin, Assistant Director, Policy and Public Affairs, British Board of Film Classification (London), Mr Simon Little, Managing Director of the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (Brussels), and Mr Neil McLatchie, School of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent (Canterbury).
6. I am most grateful to all the experts and politicians who have thus contributed to the truly European elaboration of this report.

2. The correlation between media violence and violent behaviour

7. Over decades of research, several theories and models have been developed that try to explain the mechanisms by which the reception of media violence translates into aggressive behaviour. These approaches vary by the duration of the effects they describe (short-term or long-term), by the pathway they focus on (arousal, emotions, cognition, etc.) and by the fundamental question of whether media violence has positive, negative or no effects. The main ideas of these approaches can be briefly described as follows.⁵

4. See the video of the hearing in Paris at <http://videos.senat.fr/video/videos/2012/video15708.html>.

5. The following paragraphs are based on the presentation made by Dr Astrid Zipfel at the committee hearing in Paris in December 2012.

2.1. Theories, models and empirical research

8. The Catharsis Theory is the only theory that claims positive effects of media violence. It assumes that the viewing of such content would lead to an engagement in fantasy aggression, thereby permitting the purging of the viewer's feelings and the discharging of aggressive tendencies. Consequently, the viewer is less inclined to behave aggressively after viewing media violence. This theory has not been confirmed by methodologically sound research.

9. The simple assumption that media violence is imitated directly through an unspecified "suggestion process" (Suggestion Theory or Contagion Effects) has been refuted. Some special conditions may exist that allow for an imitation of violent acts (which has been examined with respect to suicide, in particular). However, these cases are better explained by more differentiated theories – media content seems to be only one of many more important causes or the final trigger for an action that was planned long before. Details of the media content and the attributes of the recipient must be considered.

10. The Habituation Theory emphasises cumulative, long-term effects in the form of emotional blunting and desensitisation. While viewing media violence seems actually to reduce emotional and physiological reactions to the respective content in the long run, evidence that it also affects the attitude towards violence in real life, diminishes empathy with the victims of violence and reduces the inhibition threshold for the viewer's own aggressive behaviour is scarce.

11. Heavy media users supposedly suffer from a distorted view of social reality. Viewing violence may cultivate a fear of crime and the belief that the world is a mean and scary place (Cultivation Theory). Research is currently concentrating on intervening variables in that process, for example victimisation experience.

12. The Instigation of Fear effect has mainly been investigated with respect to children. Research shows greater importance of the individual relevance of the content (which differs according to developmental stage and personal experiences) than of the sheer amount of violence.

13. The Excitation Transfer Theory claims that different types of media content (violence, but also eroticism, humour, sports, etc.) can cause a state of unspecific arousal that intensifies any subsequent (but not necessarily violent) actions.

14. The Stimulation Theory holds that a state of emotional arousal may be brought about by frustration, which then leads to an aggressive disposition. This can result in violent behaviour if the individual meets situational cues that are associated with the actual feeling of anger, that bear a resemblance with past experiences (also media content) or that are generally supposed to instigate aggression (weapons for example).

15. The Priming Theory assumes that violent media stimuli can activate violent associations in the individual's brain and, in the short term, unconsciously influence the perception of situations and the choice of behavioural options.

16. The Social Learning Theory postulates that people adopt patterns of behaviour by observing other people's actions (in reality or in the media). However, these patterns do not necessarily have to be acted out. Normally, violence underlies inhibiting conditions (for example social norms, fear of revenge, sense of guilt, etc.). However, observing or experiencing positive consequences (rewards, success, etc.) following violent acts encourages the transfer from latent behavioural patterns to manifest action. The Social Learning Theory additionally considers attributes of media content (comprehensibility, justification, etc.), attributes of the observer (character, cognitive abilities, former experiences, etc.) and social conditions (socialisation, values, etc.). It takes into account that different observers perceive the same content differently and therefore derive different stimuli for their own actions.

17. The General Aggression Model tries to integrate different concepts. It suggests that behaviour results from personal and situational factors that affect cognition, emotions and arousal, thereby influencing the appraisal of a situation and the subsequent choice of behavioural options. Environmental reactions to this behaviour retroact and reinforce or inhibit the chosen behaviour in the future. Repeated processes of learning, activation and reinforcement may result in durable aggressive concepts and desensitisation, which lead to an aggressive personality and violent behaviour in the future. The General Aggression Model currently is the most frequently used approach in media violence research. However, this model has never been fully tested. It is universal but it lacks specification of many factors, such as the role of media violence.

18. The relatively new Catalyst Model claims that media violence at most influences the shaping of violent behaviour but not its instigation. Violent behaviour, in fact, results from a combination of genetic factors, family influences (especially experiences with violence) and situational environmental factors (for example stress).

19. To sum up, the vast majority of theories and models on media violence find a link between exposure to media violence and violent behaviour. The pathways that may lead to violent behaviour are arousal (which, however, is only effective for a very short time), habituation/desensitisation processes and the acquisition and activation of violent cognitions. Of these, cognitive theories seem to have the most support. However, notably, the different pathways are not mutually exclusive and violent behaviour is not an inevitable consequence.

20. Reviewing the huge body of methodologically diverse empirical studies leads to the conclusion that the scale of the effects of media violence is small to moderate (the correlation coefficient “r”, which can vary between -1 and +1, is usually between 0.1 and 0.3). In other words, only some 10% of a person’s aggression is explained by media violence; the rest is due to other factors. However, this percentage represents an average – it may be stronger (or weaker) for particular individuals. For example, studies that focused on problem groups (for example juveniles with a criminal record) have found much stronger effects. The same considerations hold true for particular variants of media content. Hence, the effects of media violence are moderated by – or are contingent upon – several additional factors. This is the focus of ongoing research.

2.2. Factors influencing media violence effects

21. The present state of knowledge verifies the relevance of the risk factors indicated below. However, it is important to state that these factors do not allow for a reliable identification of potential perpetrators or media content that will unconditionally instigate aggression. These are only hints of relevant factors whose actual effects arise from a complex network of interacting variables.

Factor	Explanation
Recipient	
Male gender	Preference for violent media content
Lower age	Comprehension of violent storylines without stable moral concepts and behavioural patterns
Aggressive predispositions	Preference for violent media content; higher risk of acting out aggressive tendencies
Sensation seekers	Preference for violent media content, proneness to risk
Violent socialisation (family, school, peers, etc.)	“Double dose” of violent role models (violent media models and own violent experiences reinforcing each other)
Media content/context of violence	
Justification of violence	Elimination of moral concern, suitability of violent perpetrators as role models
Attractive, successful perpetrator	High identification potential, suitability as role model
Perpetrator has similarities to the recipient	High identification potential, suitability as role model
Violence is rewarded (or at least not punished)	Higher motivation for learning and acting out violent behavioural patterns
No negative consequences of violence for the victim	Lack of empathy for the victim, no reason for critical reflection of violence

2.3. The specific case of video games⁶

22. Children today are using media more than ever before. By the age of six the average child spends 14 hours in front of a screen, and by the age of 18, the average child spends 45 hours a week using entertainment media, which is more time than they spend at school. While television remains the most accessed media source, advances in technology mean people can now access media through devices such as personal computers, tablets, laptops, mobile phones and gaming consoles.

23. The media can entertain, educate and inform, but they have also become more violent. By the age of 18, the average child has seen 200 000 acts of violence on television. 60% of television programmes contain violence, half of which are shown during children’s programming. Similarly, 90% of films suitable for adolescents contain violence, half of which are of a lethal magnitude.

6. The following paragraphs are based on the presentation by Mr Neil McLatchie from the School of Psychology, Keynes College, University of Kent at Canterbury, made to the committee in London in May 2013.

24. Video games are a popular form of media, played by 97% of adolescents. These games have been under the spotlight recently because they are growing more engaging and violent. Around 94% of video games contain content descriptors for violence, and almost 26% contain content descriptors for blood and gore. In comparison to other media sources, video games also have the unique ability to reward specific behaviours such as killing, through goal fulfilment, advancement to the next level, and through social approval.

25. The effects of violent video games provoke mixed views amongst the public. 75% of parents think that violent video games contribute to violent behaviour, whereas violent video game players tend to believe violent video games have no effect on aggression. A common retort to this discussion involving violence and video games is that violent video games are “just a game” – just as football games cannot teach players to play football, violent video games cannot teach players to be violent. Despite its intuitiveness, multiple studies have shown that gamers respond to virtual events as if they are morally relevant, a result which would not be expected if it were “just a game”. To illustrate this point one study found that after playing a violent video game, gamers reported feeling more guilty when the violence was not justified compared to when the violence was justified. Additionally, research has also shown that children who play violent video games view the world as a scarier place, are more fearful and initiate more self-defensive acts than children who do not play violent video games.

26. There are two specific ways in which violent video games have been found to fuel aggressive behaviour. The first one is dehumanisation and refers to the denial of human traits to another person. It is used as a form of moral disengagement so that when we harm someone we often see them as less human so we do not feel as bad that we harmed them. One example of a study showed that participants who played a violent video game ascribed less human emotions (for example hope and envy) to a partner compared to participants who played a non-violent video game. These participants that dehumanised after playing the violent video game then gave a less favourable character assessment of their partner on a mock job application form. This was viewed as an act of aggression since the participants were told that their assessment would directly impact their partner’s chances of getting a job.

27. The second mechanism through which violent video games lead to aggression is through desensitisation. Generally, when we see an act of violence we respond emotionally and physiologically. For example, we feel empathy or anger and our heart rate increases and we sweat more. Research has shown that both of these reactions to violence can be desensitised. Children who play violent video games have less empathy than children who do not play these violent games. This has important real life consequences, as research has shown that it can also make us less willing to help people when they are in need.

28. The conclusions about the effects of violent video games on aggression are only as good as the underlying research and there is still much that psychologists do not know. In the future, researchers need to work more closely with regulators to provide research that is relevant for ratings, as not all groups respond to violent video games in the same way. For example, gender (boys respond more aggressively than girls) and age (children respond more aggressively than adults) influence the way players respond to violent video games. Current research also lacks the precision required to make informed ratings decisions. We do not have the level of detail in research to distinguish between acceptability of violence towards a human character or non-human fantasy character for a specific age range. Yet, PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) ratings systems are drawn up as though we do.

2.4. Child pornography as a form of media violence

29. At the committee hearing in London, Mr John Carr, Member of the Executive Board of the UK Council on Child Internet Safety, explained that there is a clear consensus that engagement with child abuse images leads to an increased probability that the person involved in viewing this material will then go on to commit sexual offences against children. A conservative estimate according to current research suggests that around 15% of the people caught in possession of child abuse images are actual or potential child abusers. Engagement with these images puts these viewers on the path that may lead them to commit sexual offences against children. It is therefore extremely important to prevent people from finding and becoming engaged with these images.

30. It is challenging to monitor and regulate the content found on the Internet as there is such a vast amount of information available. Many countries around the world have an Internet hotline where any member of the public can report child abuse images or pornography, and around one third of these reported instances are actually of an illegal nature. Shockingly, last year The Internet Watch Foundation found that 81% of all child abuse images featured children under the age of 10. The Internet Watch Foundation also maintains a list of all of the addresses of websites and newsgroups where these illegal images are being found and it

distributes that list to every Internet service provider and mobile phone companies. 98.6% of those who use the Internet will be using it through a carrier that deploys that list to block access to those sites with illegal images on it, and each Internet service provider must demonstrate that it is taking steps to block access to these child pornographic images.

31. The parental filter is another measure that has been put in place to protect children and young people from accessing inappropriate material via their mobile phones. Since 2004, all mobile phone companies except one have adopted a voluntary agreement whereby they place legal adult sites containing pornographic, gambling, violence or self-harm related content behind a parental filter, and access is only granted once it is proven that the customer is 18 or older.

32. It is also important to offer filtering for websites, particularly as free Wi-Fi access has become more publicly available. Historically, content protective measures have sometimes been overlooked. For example, Starbucks' Wi-Fi had no restrictions in place and, although this was remedied when questioned in the United Kingdom, the filters have yet to be adopted in other European countries. The British Prime Minister, David Cameron, has personally backed such content filtering and is working towards all free Wi-Fi access having restrictions in place. However, at present there is no legal compulsion for companies to agree to this. While such filtering could reflect cultural differences in Europe, it must not be applied to censor political criticism.

33. It is not certain what consequences this widespread exposure to pornography may have on society. Various studies have shown that exposure to pornography is changing the attitude of boys and girls and what they expect sex to be about. Girlfriends are expected to do the same things that professional porn actresses do and, particularly amongst young people, this is coarsening the discourse on sex and relationships.

2.5. Violence by individual users through cyber media

34. Users of Internet media can use such media for violent behaviour against other users. Bullying was analysed by the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media in the 2010 report by Mr Gvozden Flego on education against violence at school.⁷ Cyber-bullying, as a specific type of bullying, can take the format of direct (e-mails, SMSs) or indirect psychological aggression (posting photographs and comments on the Internet) towards others. In both cases, new digital media are used by people to inflict psychological stress on others.

35. As cyber-bullying and other forms of bullying are quite frequent among young people and might even lead to suicides, governments should address this phenomenon in particular at school level, as outlined in [Resolution 1803 \(2011\)](#) on education against violence at school. This form of violence through the media has received wide public attention,⁸ but Internet service providers have yet to address this matter adequately, for instance through helplines and educational assistance to users – in particular young users.

36. Self-violence might be propagated by media content, although research has shown that other factors are necessary in order to actually trigger suicidal acts (see paragraph 9 above). With regard to media reporting, the World Health Organisation produced in 2008 *Guidelines on Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals*.⁹

37. Internet media have also been used by individuals in order to share with others user-generated pictures and videos of extreme violence. The latter media content is prohibited by law in probably all European countries. While such cases are rare in relative terms,¹⁰ their absolute numbers require strict action by law-enforcement authorities and their co-operation across borders. Social networks should exclude such content through their user agreements and codes of ethics.

3. Standards set by the Council of Europe

38. The Committee of Ministers addressed media violence 25 years ago, adopting Recommendation No. R (89) 7 concerning principles on the distribution of videograms having a violent, brutal or pornographic content.¹¹

7. [Doc. 12513](#), paragraphs 20-27 and 36-39 of the explanatory memorandum.

8. See, for example, initiatives in France at www.bice.org/en/news/news/campaign-stop-harassment-on-the-internet.html; in Germany at www.chatgewalt.de/, in the United Kingdom at www.childline.org.uk/Pages/Home.aspx; and in the United States at <http://stopcyberbullying.org/>.

9. www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_media.pdf.

10. See, for example, an analysis of user-generated violence videos on YouTube: <http://journalistsresource.org/studies/society/internet/youtube-content-trends-web-video-violence>.

39. Looking at media violence in more general terms, the Committee of Ministers adopted eight years later Recommendation No. R (97) 19 on the portrayal of violence in the electronic media.¹²

40. In 2008, the Committee of Ministers adopted Human Rights Guidelines for Internet Service Providers (ISPs),¹³ which recommend *inter alia* that ISPs should “provide information or link to information about risks of encountering or contributing to the dissemination of illegal content on the Internet as well as the risks for children of being exposed to harmful content or behaviour when they are online”.

41. In the same year, the Committee of Ministers also adopted Human Rights Guidelines for Online Games Providers, which call for specific attention to be paid to the portrayal of violence – especially when targeting children.¹⁴ The guidelines state that online game providers should “take care to consider and evaluate how the game content may impact on human dignity, the sensibilities and values of gamers, in particular children” and make concrete recommendations including on:

- the application of independent labelling and rating systems of games;
- the provision of appropriate information to the users, parents and carers on the risks in a users’ guide in the language of the country where the game is marketed;
- the development of in-game parental control tools.

42. The Parliamentary Assembly dealt specifically with media violence in Recommendation 963 (1983) on cultural and educational means of reducing violence, as well as in Resolution 1835 (2011) on violent and extreme pornography.

43. The only legally binding text by the Council of Europe dealing with media violence is the European Convention on Transfrontier Television (ETS Nos. 132 and 171), which contains the following obligation:

Article 7 – Responsibilities of the broadcaster

1. All items of programme services, as concerns their presentation and content, shall respect the dignity of the human being and the fundamental rights of others.

In particular, they shall not:

- a. be indecent and in particular contain pornography;*
- b. give undue prominence to violence or be likely to incite to racial hatred.*

2. All items of programme services which are likely to impair the physical, mental or moral development of children and adolescents shall not be scheduled when, because of the time of transmission and reception, they are likely to watch them.

44. The Standing Committee established under this convention agreed in 2009 on the following revision of this article, but the Committee of Ministers has still to agree to such revision:¹⁵

Article 6 – Responsibilities of media service providers

The presentation and content of audiovisual media services shall respect the dignity of the human being and the fundamental rights of others.

In particular they shall not contain any incitement to hatred based on race, sex, religion or nationality.

...

Media service providers shall ensure the adequate protection of minors. In particular, they will ensure that:

television broadcasts do not include programmes which might seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of minors, in particular those that involve pornography or gratuitous violence. This provision shall be extended to other television programmes which are likely to impair the physical,

11. [https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?](https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=610420&SecMode=1&DocId=701366&Usage=2)

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12. [https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?](https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=610420&SecMode=1&DocId=701366&Usage=2)

[Index=no&command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=610420&SecMode=1&DocId=701366&Usage=2.](https://wcd.coe.int/com.instranet.InstraServlet?command=com.instranet.CmdBlobGet&InstranetImage=610420&SecMode=1&DocId=701366&Usage=2)

13. Developed by the Council of Europe in co-operation with the European Internet Service Providers Association (EuroISPA): www.coe.int/t/information/society/documents/HRguidelines_ISP_en.pdf.

14. *Ibid.*, [www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/Doc/H-Inf\(2008\)008_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/standardsetting/media/Doc/H-Inf(2008)008_en.pdf).

15. <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/X2H-Xref-ViewPDF.asp?FileID=20515&lang=en>.

mental or moral development of minors, except where it is ensured, by selecting the time of the broadcast or by any technical means, that minors in the area of transmission will not normally hear or see such broadcasts;

on-demand services which might seriously impair the physical, mental or moral development of minors are only made available in such a way that ensures that minors will not normally hear or see such on-demand services.

45. The overall yardstick for freedom of expression and information in the media is, of course, Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5). The European Court of Human Rights has developed a large body of case law in this context, although it has not yet had the opportunity to decide specifically on cases of media violence.

4. Standards set by other organisations

4.1. National media classification bodies

46. Many member States have created specialised bodies or regulatory authorities which address, *inter alia*, media violence. In May 2013, the committee heard representatives of the Netherlands Institute for the Classification of Audiovisual Media (NICAM)¹⁶ and the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC).¹⁷

47. NICAM was founded in 1999. It is a foundation set up with one specific goal – to help parents and educators of children (aged 1 to 16) by providing information on the potential unsuitability of audiovisual productions. They introduced the “Kijkwijzer” system, meaning “watch wiser” or “viewing guide”. This is a universal classifications system for television programmes, cinema films, DVDs and video games. Research suggests that up to 90% of Dutch parents use the system, as well as children aged 9 to 14 (particularly girls) because they wish to be informed of the potential risks and consequences of watching certain audiovisual media.

48. NICAM’s approach has spread internationally, for example to Iceland and Finland. NICAM only provides information on the potential unsuitability of audiovisual content and not its suitability. It does this by informing adults, parents and children using pictograms indicating minimum age and information about the content of the media (for example contains sex, violence, drugs). “Kijkwijzer” is not an independent body but a self-rating system – the classification process is the responsibility of the broadcasters and media distributors. NICAM receives half of its funding from the government; the rest comes from public and private broadcasters and DVD and film distributors.

49. The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science has developed an online media guide for children called “mediasmarties.nl”, which provides objective information about games, television programmes, films, DVDs, CD-ROMs, websites and online games. Mediasparties.nl is an independent website without commercial interests. Providing objective reviews, content descriptions and age indications, it is designed for parents, educators and people working in childcare, schools and youth centres.

50. The BBFC has been the United Kingdom’s regulator of film since 1912 and of videos since 1984. The BBFC is self-financing and independent of government involvement. Since 2008, the BBFC has been classifying age-related content distributed online. All classification decisions are based on published guidelines which are updated every four years following large-scale consultations. These typically involve around 10 000 people who take part in interviews, focus groups and questionnaires. The public decides what level of content they feel is acceptable at different age ranges.

51. Generally, the BBFC classification systems give an age rating and content advice regarding a particular piece of content, but occasionally it intervenes and makes content cuts or rejects content entirely. This happens in two circumstances: either because of United Kingdom law (indecent images of children), or because of a potential harm risk (depiction of violent pornography).

52. In 2011, the BBFC implemented the policy concerning the depiction of sexual violence, as a number of films were showing this sort of extreme content at the time. It was necessary to intervene with all of them, either cutting material out at scene level, or banning the film entirely because of the harm risks that BBFC

16. The paragraphs on NICAM are based on the presentation made by Ms Tineke Ladders-Elfferich and Mr Wim Bekkers, who represented NICAM.

17. The paragraphs on the BBFC are based on the presentation made by Mr David Austin, who represented the BBFC.

believed they posed. It is illegal in the United Kingdom to supply uncut versions of these films. Like NICAM, the BBFC keeps depictions of strong or glamorised violence away from impressionable young children. Research has found that over 80% of parents with children under the age of 16 value the work of the BBFC.

53. Online however, many of these regulations disappear. It is felt that online content should now be regulated as strongly as offline content. The BBFC thinks there is a case for more co- and self-regulation. The key factors for success of an online regulatory system are: to have child protection at its core, to have effective (trusted and recognised) labelling of content, to have broad coverage that is low cost and efficient, and to be flexible and innovative.

54. Since 2008, the BBFC has been working with industry to create a number of self-regulatory services. "Watch and rate" provides consumers with access to labelling and content information for content that will only ever be distributed online. Moreover, Netflix allows parents to then filter this age-inappropriate content. Another example is the prototype tool which will allow peer and community ratings of content according to trusted standards. It is hoped that this will be piloted later this year in Italy. The BBFC is also introducing another initiative to provide filtering solutions in line with BBFC classifications for certain Internet content, for example websites that encourage violent behaviour can be put behind filters and kept away from children.

55. The BBFC and NICAM have developed a tool that makes it possible to rate user-generated content online. "You rate it" is a simple rating tool based on BBFC and NICAM ratings. It can be embedded in any video upload site to facilitate user-generated ratings. Ratings can inform users of the content via websites, apps, search engines and filter software, thus enabling users to make selections. Ratings can also be done by the uploader or by the user community. It is not yet in its pilot stage but discussions are under way.

56. Today, children must be protected. The challenge is to do so in a relatively inexpensive way without impinging upon freedom of expression. The success of these initiatives, however, ultimately depends on the public using these tools and filters effectively. The systems therefore need to be trusted and easily understood. Another challenge relates to the use of international tools whilst maintaining national and cultural differences in acceptability.

4.2. The Pan-European Game Information (PEGI) system

57. According to the findings of the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFOE),¹⁸ between one third and one half of people aged 6 years or over play video games, and although this tends to decrease as they get older, almost half of 25 to 34 year-olds play video games. Almost 60% of parents believed that playing video games has a positive impact on the development of skills in children. Similarly, nearly 50% of parents believed that playing video games has a positive impact on children's creativity. The majority of parents, moreover, do not feel that video games provoke aggressive behaviour in children.

58. It is generally accepted that violent narratives are not appropriate for children, and it is on that basis that the industry adopted a precautionary principle. Ten years ago, the industry developed and launched the PEGI system. PEGI is a Europe-wide system of self-regulation, promoting the appropriate sale and use of video games. It is based on a contractual code of conduct and licenses and was jump-started by a European Council resolution of March 2002. Since its creation, PEGI has been supported by the European Commission, the European Parliament and national governments from many countries, from Iceland to Israel. It is important to note that PEGI is only a classification system – it does not censor or ban games; that remains the responsibility of the governments.

59. PEGI is essentially a two-part information system. The first part comprises age icons which are based on criteria developed by experts in child development, psychology and media fields. For example, to obtain an age rating of PEGI 3+ the violence would have to be stylised and cartoonish, not recognisable as violence as such. The second part of the information system comprises the content descriptors – these are the reasons why a game is given a particular age rating and here culture sometimes influences the acceptability of content. For example, bad language may be particularly important to the English but not to the Dutch. Regardless of local differences, the age label plus the content descriptor enable parents to make informed purchasing decisions.

18. The following paragraphs are based on the presentation by Mr Simon Little, Managing Director of the Interactive Software Federation of Europe (ISFOE) in Brussels, made to the committee in London in May 2013.

60. A PEGI 7+ game still appears cartoon-like, has features of a scary nature that are not necessarily violent but which might still be concern for parents who do not want their children to have nightmares. A PEGI 12+ game starts to look more realistic, but the violence remains stylised. Although not strictly covered by this rating, simulated gambling and sexual posturing are usually included.

61. A PEGI 16+ game features violence that looks quite realistic and quite graphic scenes of a sexual nature, drug references and profane language. A PEGI 18+ game features sometimes quite disturbing scenes on a par with some film products. In the United Kingdom at least, it is illegal to sell these games to people who are under age. It should be noted that these scenes can usually be avoided, and tend to only reflect a few seconds of what for experts can be a six-hour game.

62. The first step of the rating is the process of self-assessment by the game creators, who are best placed to judge the game's content. Two independent third parties then verify these ratings. Structurally, supporting the management board, PEGI also has an expert group and a criteria committee, which are constantly reviewing PEGI criteria and ensuring it remains up to date with public opinion and advances in technology. Supporting those, PEGI has a Complaints Board and an Enforcement Committee which review complaints that arise from consumers and publishers and enforce the contractual penalties in place.

63. PEGI can issue a fine of up to €500 000 and impose the compulsory withdrawal from the market and/or re-rating and editing of content as necessary. This is overseen by the PEGI council which is made up of representatives from the PEGI member countries who are likely to be civil servants in the ministries of media and culture.

64. In 2012, more than half of the 1 800 PEGI-rated games were suitable for young children, and 75% were suitable for pre-teens. Only 9% were in the PEGI 18+ category and only 1% had any reference to drugs. Interestingly, these figures do not include any of the thousands of games available on phones and tablets which would tend to be rated predominantly at a 3+ and 7+ rating and used more by casual gamers as opposed to core gamers frequently using games consoles.

65. PEGI is a robust system for rating physical products in retail; however there are now many ways to access games. New platforms often prefer to use their own age-rating systems. PEGI is trying to improve its reach for these non-physical retail products and has developed "PEGI for Apps", which is more efficient and cost-effective than traditional PEGI rating methods as the ratings are made using a post-release audit system. Additionally, PEGI for Apps uses feature descriptors for guidance as it has been found that content is of lower concern to parents than certain features, for example personal data sharing, social interactivity or location sharing.

66. PEGI is co-operating with the United States and Brazil and hopefully later Japan, Australia and South Korea, in order to address the global nature of app stores and harmonise the classification system so that it leads to different national ratings relevant to specific countries, taking into account their cultural specificities.

5. Conclusions

67. Professor Jo Groebel stated at the committee hearing in Paris in December 2012 that, when violence in the media is high, like for example in Japan, and social control is also very high, there is little violence in reality, but the suicide rate is important: violence is turned against oneself. However, when social control is at a very low level, and it is associated with a high level of violence in the media, like in the favelas of Brazil, South Africa and in parts of the United States, this leads to a high level of violence in real life and can form an explosive mixture. Media violence therefore has to be seen as an indicator in a given society and media policies have to be contextualised.

68. Since traditional audiovisual media such as cinema films, videos and television still play a major role in the media landscape, the existing regulations and self-regulatory examples remain valid and must be maintained. The advent of the Internet does not justify reducing our social norms to an unregulated or anarchic State.

69. The lessons learnt from traditional media regulation and self-regulation should be applied intelligently to new forms of media, where possible. However, adjustments or new additional approaches have to be pursued in order to avoid lacunae or grey zones of insecurity.

70. Such approaches depend largely on co-operation by all stakeholders of the rapidly evolving new online media, namely by governments, the private sector or industry and civil society or user groups. In addition, scientific expert advice is necessary for all three categories.