Parliamentary Assembly
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Violence in and through the media

Parliamentary Assembly

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 have had intensive prior exposure to violence in the media. It is therefore of utmost importance for democratic societies to address this correlation appropriately.

2. Over the last decade, the media landscape has changed due, in particular, to the enormous growth of the Internet and online media. These media, and a convergence of traditional media with online social networks with user-to-user content, have created new forms of media violence which they disseminate. 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 violence. 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, Internet tools (social networks, chat rooms, search engines, online shopping, and so on) and the universal accessibility of those media (via "smartphones") create numerous possibilities for users to actively steer the violence found in and conveyed through the media, and to identify with it.

4. Because they are very active in certain new media, children (up to the age of 18) are especially exposed to the new forms of violence found in and conveyed through the media, and to all the attendant risks; their situation therefore deserves particular attention.

5. 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 interpersonal 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-harm or suicide.

6. 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. Child pornography and child abuse images as serious violations of children's rights have been covered by the Assembly in its work leading to Resolution 1834 (2011) and Recommendation 1980 (2011) on combating "child abuse images" through committed, transversal and internationally co-ordinated action. Violence may also be insidiously conveyed through the media, for example in the depiction of the hyper-sexualisation of children.

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1. *Assembly debate* on 24 June 2014 (22nd Sitting) (see Doc. 13509, report of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, rapporteur: Sir Roger Gale; and Doc. 13536, opinion of the Committee on Social Affairs, Health and Sustainable Development, rapporteur: Ms Maryvonne Blondin). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 24 June 2014 (22nd Sitting).
See also Recommendation 2048 (2014).

7. In order to address media violence effectively, all stakeholders need to recognise and assume their respective responsibilities and to be aware of the particular vulnerability of children in this sphere. States have the obligation to combat illegal forms of media violence, to protect minors against the harmful effects of media violence and to ensure access of users to information about the violence of a media service or product. The producers, and in particular commercial producers, of media with violent content bear editorial and commercial responsibility. Users, as well as parents of young users, are also responsible for such use.

8. 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.

9. Measures applied by public authorities against media violence need to be prescribed by law and necessary 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.

10. Consequently, convinced that governments, national parliaments and media service providers have a responsibility to combat violence in the media, the Assembly asks them to take the following measures:

10.1. 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;

10.2. 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;

10.3. the production, public display and sale of media whose violent content 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;

10.4. 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;

10.5. 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, particularly if violence is a central part of the content;

10.6. 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. Such 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 cases of potentially illegal content;

10.7. the producers of media reception devices (such as television sets, video players, mobile audiovisual 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.

11. The Assembly recommends that member States:

11.1. devise and implement national programmes to raise awareness both of violence and of media skills for people who work with children, for families and for children themselves;

11.2. create, in co-operation with media companies and media professionals, organisations which rate media violence, develop measures for protection against media violence and monitor compliance with such measures; where such organisations do not exist, the public regulatory authorities of member States should have such competences;

11.3. criminalise the production, distribution and possession of violent and extreme pornography, in particular where images of violence and aggression towards children are concerned;

11.4. provide education about media violence in school curricula and in teacher training programmes.

12. The Assembly invites:

12.1. media professionals to develop, through their professional organisations, a code of conduct for journalists, photographers and editors dealing with violent media content;

12.2. 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.