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A Look at Violence in the Media

This past June, the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in on the long-standing public debate over the influence of violence in the media when it overturned a California law banning the sale of violent video games to those under the age of 18. The Court ruled that video games are protected as free speech under the First Amendment. California passed the law in 2005 in response to research linking violent media images to an increase in aggression in children. The State argued that it should be able to restrict the sale of violent video games to minors just as it can restrict the sale of sexually-explicit material. The Court disagreed citing a lack of clear evidence of a causal link between violent games and violent behavior, or that violent games caused more harm to children than other types of media which are not restricted. Further, the Court found that the video game industry's voluntary rating system can help parents protect their children.

California's law might have had a considerable impact on the video game industry, as some of its best selling games, like "Call of Duty" and "Grand Theft-Auto" have a "Mature" rating.¹ Had the Court upheld the law, the door would have opened to new restrictions for other types of media, which would be certain to generate even more controversy. Media entertainment is big business. In 2010, people in North America spent billions of dollars on movies, video games, and music. Today media encompasses more than books and magazines, television, movies, computer and video games, the Internet, and music and music videos. New forms of entertainment like apps, podcasts, and YouTube have become extremely popular. There are more than 425,000 apps available for the iPhone;² another 250,000 apps have been developed for Google's mobile platform, Android.³ In addition, advancements in technology have led to new ways to access media. For example, you can watch television over the Internet with services like Hulu or you can download an app and watch television on your iPad; you can buy or rent movies from iTunes and watch them on your iPhone or iPod or you can stream movies from Netflix using your Nintendo Wii game console; you can purchase digital music from a variety of websites and listen to it on your cell phone or mp3 player. With the current trend to get all your media on one device, the possibilities are almost endless.

Given the easy and convenient ways to access media entertainment, it is not surprising that media plays a large role in the lives of people today. One study found that children between the ages of eight and eighteen typically

spend seven and a half hours a day, every day, with entertainment media.⁴ Their views on family, friends, relationships, gender roles, sex, violence, and many, many other topics are shaped by what they hear and see on television and the Internet and in movies, music, and video games. The impact these have on their lives is significant. While many of these topics may be worrisome to parents and others, one that has been the subject of much controversy is violence.

It is not a new controversy. As the California case demonstrates, there is still debate about the potential relationship to real-life violence. Some studies have linked violent media images to increases in aggression; however, there doesn't seem to be any clear evidence that violent media is a direct cause of violence. At the very least, many people believe that constant exposure to these images makes us numb to the consequences of real violence and contributes to desensitization and a lack of empathy in our society.

Lest we forget, violence has played a role in entertainment for centuries. As early as 2000 B.C., the ancient Egyptians viewed public dramas reenacting the murder and dismemberment of their god, Osiris. The ancient Romans entertained themselves with gladiator games. However, there seems to be some agreement that something has changed. The amount of violence has increased and it is pervasive, making it a part of daily life. Violence in the media has also become much more graphic, sexual, and sadistic. It is hard to turn on the television in the evening and not see some type of violence. The nightly news often contains images of war and violent crime; television shows commonly include scenes showing dead bodies surrounded by pools of blood. In the music industry, violent lyrics are mainstream. The controversial yet successful rap artist, Eminem, known for his violent and misogynistic lyrics, recently became the first artist ever to sell one million digital copies of an album in the U.S.⁵

Despite its prevalence, it is difficult to define what actually constitutes violent media. For example, should a song with one line depicting violence be considered violent media? What about mild violence versus intense violence? Is one more acceptable than the other? How about cartoons? The definition of violence often differs from person to person given our own unique sensitivities and beliefs. As a society, how do we determine when something crosses the line?

Over the years, some forms of media entertainment have developed rating systems, largely in response to the threat of more restrictive government regulations, to help guide parents in choosing appropriate content for their children. These rating systems are specific to each industry and vary in terms of the categories used and how much description they provide about the content. The degree of outside or independent input in the ratings, the implementation and enforcement of the ratings, and the cooperation from retailers also varies between the systems. All the rating systems are voluntary; however, the absence of a rating may negatively impact the product or business. For example, a movie without a rating is not likely to be shown in many theatre chains. Similarly, in the case of computer and video games, most major retailers will not stock or sell games that have not been rated and most console manufacturers will not allow games to be published for their platforms unless they have been rated.⁶ All the rating systems consider factors in addition to violence, such as language, sex and nudity, alcohol and drug use, and other adult situations.

Perhaps the rating system that is the most lenient and least informative is the music industry's Parental Advisory Label (PAL) Program. Under this program, music containing explicit lyrics is labeled with the words "Parental Advisory Explicit Content." No other information describing the content or reason for the label is provided. In contrast, the ratings used by the movie, television, and video game industries provide some indication about the age-appropriateness of the media as well as the specific content that it contains. In the music industry, the decision to label a song as explicit is solely up to the artists and their labels, whereas movies are rated by an independent Board of parents and video games are rated by adults who typically have some experience with children. For television, most programs are rated by the broadcast and cable networks. With the exception of the music industry, all have an additional Board or staff that is responsible for handling appeals or reviewing the ratings to ensure consistency in how they are assigned.

A couple of the rating systems address advertising. Advertisements for movies and video games are reviewed and there are restrictions on when and where those ads may appear. Cooperation with retailers has also been important to implementing the ratings. Many major retailers and rental stores have policies requiring age

verification for the sale or rental of games rated "Mature" or "Adults-Only." Theatre owners, retailers, and rental stores have the same type of policies for movies.

What about some of the new forms of media entertainment? Are there any ratings or content descriptions to help parents and others make choices about these? Yes, there are. However, no cohesive rating system applies to all versions of the same media. For example, Apple and Google, the two largest distributors of apps, each have their own content policies and rating system for apps. Even the party assigning the ratings is different. Apple reviews all of the apps available in its App Store and determines the content rating each app receives, whereas Google requires the developer of an app to assign a rating based on Google's guidelines; Google only reviews apps that have been flagged by users who believe that the app was rated incorrectly.

Violence in the media is not going away. Given the role that media plays in people's lives and the effects that it may have on society, the concern expressed by some is understandable. The issue is complicated and there is a lot to consider, more than what can be addressed here. It is important, though, for companies and investors to understand these issues because of the financial and reputational risks they present. Many companies are involved in the process of producing, distributing, and selling violent media. Since violence can be difficult to define, it can be challenging to determine each company's level of involvement and to evaluate its response to concerns. In the case of companies creating content, there does not seem to be much effort to restrict violence. In fact, it's almost the opposite; companies continually push the limit of what is acceptable. On the other hand, many retailers, under pressure from social investors, have tried to limit the audience for extremely violent media by implementing voluntary policies to restrict the sale of certain products to minors. The actions that companies take to address concerns about violence in the media will change as the issue continues to change and technology evolves. Regrettably, real violence is part of our world and it affects people from all countries and cultures. Our entertainment and news reflects our realities, so it is unreasonable to expect violence to disappear from the media. Just how that violence is portrayed and how we choose to restrict access will likely continue to be cause for debate.

¹ Kendall, Brent. "UPDATE: US Supreme Court Rules California Videogame Law Unconstitutional." *Dow Jones News Service* [Washington] 27 June 2011. Web. 15 July 2011.

² *Apple*. Web. 14 Sept. 2011 <<http://www.apple.com>>.

³ Nickinson, Phil. "Android Market Now Has More Than a Quarter-Million Applications." *Android Central*. 14 July 2011. Web. 14 Sept. 2011.

⁴ Rideout, M.A., Victoria J., Ulla G. Foehr, Ph.D., and Donald F. Roberts, Ph.D. *Generation M²: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds*. Rep. Kaiser Family Foundation, 20 Jan. 2010. <<http://www.kff.org/>>.

⁵ "'21' Passes 1 Million Digital Downloads." *The Patriot-News* [Los Angeles] 19 July 2011. Web. 8 Sept. 2011.

⁶ *Entertainment Software Rating Board*. Web. 26 Aug. 2011. <<http://www.esrb.org/>>.