

Special Agenda III
Private Member's Motion
Violent Computer Games

Comment : *“Under the influence of the terrible trio – advertising, television and pop culture – modernization has caused profound changes in public discourse; above all from the shift in word to image, action to spectacle, exposition to entertainment, truth to feeling, conviction to sentiment and authoritative utterance to discussion and sharing. Most of these wider cultural shifts have been well exemplified....and the general diminishing of any sense of “Thus saith The Lord”, has been marked” Oz Guinness in “Mission in the Face of Modernity, Nov 1995.”*

There are those who argue that violent and sexual material plays little role in the conduct of people, particularly the young, or in the rising levels of crime. However, they must answer how it is that the advertising industry has grown into a multi billion pound business by changing the perceptions as well as the habits of public in matters of consumer choice? More importantly there is a large amount of research that shows harm from violent and sexual media content. In June last year the cross party Home Affairs Select Committee on Knife Crime concluded after several months of reviewing the research and taking evidence: ‘...violent DVDs and videogames exert a negative influence on those who watch and play them. Watching or playing such media contributes to around 10% of any person’s predisposition to be violent.’

In the age of the Internet and free markets it is difficult of course to know what Synod can do to limit the exposure of the vulnerable to the content of explicit video games material. However difficult the task to bring about change may be - and I sometimes wonder whether there is a correct balance between legitimate public concern and an apparent reliance by HMG on focus group studies carried out by bodies such as the British Board of Film Classification, - it is very worthwhile Synod seeking to give a firm view for the following reasons: (a) because there are few public opportunities to debate what is intrinsically right and wrong these days, and, (b) attempts by Synod to seek to limit the likely corrupting influence on the vulnerable and young by computer games will probably be warmly endorsed by our Jewish and Muslim friends. They will know they are not alone in expressing dismay at our continued propensity for downward drift towards compromise and decay that is today galloping across generations.

It is worth noting that the government has examined and reacted to some of these issues in the Byron Review 2008. However its Action Plan does not appear to go far enough in the vital area of classification.

‘That this Synod:

(a) express concern about the potentially desensitising and damaging effects upon children and young people of computer games containing gratuitous violent and sexual content;’

CORE ARGUMENT

Many experts believe that gratuitously violent computer games can harm young people (as well as adults) by making it more likely they will exhibit violent conduct or by desensitizing them. In some research similar effects are cited from exposure to explicit sexual content in films and online, i.e. an increased likelihood of abnormal, precocious, anti-social or criminal sexual behaviour that can be linked with difficulties in sexual development and forming stable families. These effects are also likely to apply to sexually explicit material in videogames, which although less widespread than violent material is nonetheless very concerning.

These likely adverse effects of such explicit videogames can damage relationships, undermine the vital role of the family unit, the bed rock of our civilized society, and can of course lead to emotional and physical harm and/or crime. A young person might acquire a criminal record and even be held in custody in a secure unit or Young Offenders’ Institution.

Videogames with explicit violent and sexual content can communicate messages about life that make parenting and teaching more difficult: (a) they tend to discourage respect for authority; (b) they can promote risky and even criminal conduct by portraying it in a glamorous or deceptive way; (c) they can put destructive ideas into children’s heads.

Youth crime, depression and teenage pregnancies are on the increase, and while many factors are, correctly, regularly cited in the public forum (e.g. family breakdown, weak parenting, lack of education, lenient sentencing, bad policing, poor sex education), the role of the media is very rarely mentioned and almost never addressed in depth. In my view, all factors must be addressed, but videogames are a particularly potent form of the media as they involve role play.

Evidence of harm should lead the government to regulate games of this type far more stringently and ban the most harmful material.

As a result, young people’s well being should improve, they would have a more positive effect on society and there would be savings across the board to the economy – in welfare payments, policing and NHS costs, etc.

So this is not a matter of freedom of expression or human rights, but a public health and economic issue. Indeed there have been press reports of videogames as a causative factor in some crimes. Although this has been contested, and it may be difficult to prove a link, it should be remembered that it is equally hard to disprove a link, so such claims should not be dismissed out of hand, and this is another area where more research

would be fruitful.

The Home Affairs Committee previously mentioned certainly saw a link with young people's behaviour and called on the government to ban violent DVDs and videogames in Young Offenders Institutions, as young people in custody are likely to be the most vulnerable to harmful media content. This seems eminently sensible, and sexually explicit videogames probably also need to be removed.

MORE DETAIL

Evidence of Harm:

- **Re violence**

Leading international expert, Professor Kevin Browne, Forensic & Child Psychology, Nottingham University, says these games are even more harmful than violent films because they involve role play.

In 2008, Professor Browne stated that the link between violent media content and violent conduct in vulnerable young men had been known for many years.

In particular the combination of growing up in a violent family, experiencing real violence and also witnessing violence indirectly through a screen seems to increase the probability of committing violent offences. Different personality types can react to violent media content differently but the result is still negative: types that are more predisposed to violence will become active in their violent behaviour as their aggressive thoughts are reinforced and triggered; those less predisposed to violence will become passive in their responses to violence as they become desensitized and accustomed to violent imagery.

According to Professor Browne, researchers have argued that if the proportion of violent crime was to be reduced by the amount contributed by media violence to an individual's predisposition (approximately 10%), then the overall effect on society would be dramatic (Paik & Comstock, 1994). This does seem to confirm the deeply held belief of many parents and teachers that if violent media content were significantly reduced, then young people's (and adults') behaviour would improve.

- **Re sexual content**

The most comprehensive research in recent years is '**A meta-analysis of the published research on the effects of pornography**', Elizabeth Oddone-Paolucci, Mark Genuis and Claudio Violato, University of Calgary, 1997. The study dealt primarily with films, magazines, TV and the internet as videogames has only just appeared. However, as sexually explicit content in all other forms of the media was found to be harmful, it is extremely likely that explicit sexual content in videogames is at least equally as harmful.

Method: A meta-analysis of 46 previous studies (from 1965 to 1995), undertaken to determine whether exposure to pornographic stimuli over the lifespan has any effect on sexual deviancy, sexual offending, intimate relationships and attitudes regarding the rape myth (i.e. women cause rape, should resist or prevent it, and rapists are normal).

It deals with the whole range of pornographic material, from 'mild pornography' (nudes, persons engaging in petting and non-violent acts of sexual intercourse without genitalia visible), through 'erotica or explicit porn' (consensual non violent sexual acts with genitalia visible), to 'violent porn' (depictions of rape, degradation, sexual aggression or sadism).

Results: The 46 studies included 12,323 people and is said to be in line with previous meta-analyses and single studies (more details can be found in the document). **'The results are clear and consistent; exposure to pornographic material puts one at an increased risk for developing sexually deviant tendencies, committing sexual offences, experiencing difficulties in one's intimate relationships, and accepting the rape myth. In order to promote a healthy and stable society, it is time that we attend to the culmination of sound empirical research.'**

'(b) We request changes to the classification system for video games in the United Kingdom to strengthen appropriate age rating and effective enforcement;'

The government's own study of films and videogames (the Byron Report) recognized harm to young people and recommended tighter classification and clearer warnings re explicit material. However, it can be argued that it has not gone far enough, as it takes no account of the fact that in recent years the age ratings have seriously slipped: material that used to be classified 18 is now often classified 15, and extremely violent material that in the past would not have been classified 18 without cuts, is now routinely passed without the cuts having been made.

The Report also found that many games are sold to underage youngsters, or fall into their hands because older teens pass them on, or parents are pressured into buying adult games for their children.

Therefore it would be best if, as previously, more of the most violent and sexually explicit games were heavily cut or simply banned (as still often happens in some other countries, e.g. Germany).

This would protect all children more effectively than the warnings recommended by the Byron Report which research shows are ineffective in the case of negligent parents. It is important to note that the very children who suffer from parental neglect are the ones who are most likely to use the media in a risky and less regulated manner.

All parents would benefit from the banning of the most explicit material, as children are often exposed to harmful media, including videogames, when they are outside the supervision of their parents, e.g. at friends' houses; or when they give in to peer pressure and defy their parents.

There is every justification on the grounds of public health for the government to legislate in order to promote socially-responsible standards in all media content including videogames. They are regulated by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), and a significant improvement in content standards could be achieved relatively easily by government action to amend legislation and strengthen the BBFC's guidelines, and

accountability to Parliament.

Moreover, Keith Vaz MP has described how he has been singled out by the gaming industry because of his campaign to get violent video games reclassified. For this reason it is more important than ever for the government, rather than individuals or pressure groups, to take on this very powerful industry

Various bodies have already drafted credible recommendations for amending the working of the BBFC to ensure that more harmful content is banned.

‘(c) call upon H M Government to review the regulatory system for advertising video games to prevent the targeting of children and young people with unsuitable material; and’

Yes there is a problem with the marketing which creates a lot of hype and it is true that out of a class of 15 year olds, say, most will have played the new game Call of Duty, for example. Some commentators claimed that the reason the last Batman film was given a 12A rating was because of merchandising, and it was actually too violent for that category .

As previously stated, parents often feel pressurized to purchase games for their underage children, and marketing plays a large part in this.

‘(d) Support programmes of education for both parents and children in managing access to video games.’

It is encouraging that the Byron Report has covered this.

Strong government legislation on regulation is the most effective solution but in its absence, education for parents and children becomes very important (However it must be remembered that the most vulnerable children come from families which will not be easily convinced or educated about this and there is research evidence to back this up.)

In theory the government are already involved in promoting ‘media literacy’ but I question whether this is happening on any scale or communicating effectively the dangers of harm from the media in general and videogames in particular.

As Christians, we are called to protect the most vulnerable in society from harm, and it seems that explicit violent and sexual content in videogames has the potential to harm our young people and vulnerable adults to such a degree, that it is our inalienable responsibility to take action.

Tom Benyon (Oxford)

Statistics supplied by **mediamarch**, a voluntary group that campaigns for family values in media content

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