I
n April 1999, two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., gunned down 12 of their classmates and a teacher and then killed themselves. Like earlier ghastly and seemingly inexplicable crimes, this one generated a frenzied search for explanations. But instead of talking about the easy availability of firearms, the mean social pecking order at Columbine High School or the personal demons that drove the two young criminals, many politicians and media pundits focused on violent entertainment.

This year, as the presidential election neared, former Republican presidential candidate John McCain, Democratic vice presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman and other senators sharply attacked the entertainment industry for marketing violent products to children and adolescents. At a five-hour hearing before the Senate Commerce Committee, several lawmakers threat-
ened to take legislative action if the industry failed to change its marketing practices.

But would censorship legislation or a one-size-fits-all system for rating, and limiting access to, music, movies, videos, television, computer games and other entertainment really curb youth violence? To answer that, we first must test the widely held assumption that media violence really is harmful to minors. Despite the exaggerated claims by pro-censorship forces, a meticulous review of the research shows weak to nonexistent evidence of any widespread causative effect.

In the wake of Columbine, politicians were quick to act on the premise that media are harmful. President Clinton immediately summoned entertainment industry executives to a White House meeting on youth violence. Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., proposed a Children’s Defense Act banning the distribution to minors of “sexually explicit or violent material.” Sen. Ernest Hollings, D-S.C., introduced a bill to prohibit the broadcast of “any violent video programming” at times when “children are reasonably likely to comprise a substantial portion of the audience.”

At Senate hearings just days after the disaster, Professor Henry Jenkins of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology was the lone scholar to question the assumption that TV violence, rock music, video games or other forms of entertainment were responsible for the teenagers’ murderous rampage. Disaffected young people move “nomadically across the media landscape,” Jenkins testified, “cobbling together a personal mythology of symbols and stories taken from many different places.” How individuals use the messages and images from popular culture depends on upbringing, family environment, inherited characteristics and other aspects of background and character.

The concept of “media effects” in psychology—that violent entertainment has the consistent, predictable effect of desensitizing viewers or making them more aggressive—has recently been “challenged by numerous American and international scholars as an inadequate and simplistic representation of media consumption and popular culture,” Jenkins said.

Historically, violence is an eternal theme in literature, art, popular entertainment and even games invented by children at play. From the gory wartime atrocities in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to the fantasy action in *Mortal Kombat* and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, human culture has displayed, reflected and documented aggression and violence. Debates over their effects are just as ancient: In the fourth century B.C., Plato insisted that the government should censor unsavory or unpatriotic messages in epic and tragic

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poetry. His pupil Aristotle had a more nuanced view; he originated the idea that gruesome portrayals in the theater, instead of inspiring imitation, were cathartic. By inspiring pity and fear, they purged the spectators of unruly emotions and made it less likely that they would actually behave violently.

Young people have often been at the center of these debates, but society has not always viewed them as particularly vulnerable, innocent and impressionable. Historian Philippe Ariès, in his book *Centuries of Childhood*, noted that ideas of childhood innocence and vulnerability first came into vogue at the end of the 16th century.

Not until the 19th century, though, did censorship in the name of protecting youth really flourish. Authorities deemed the most dangerous subject to be sex rather than violence, but Anthony Comstock, director of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and a leading U.S. cultural arbiter for 40 years, also attacked “penny dreadfuls,” dime novels and police magazines as perils for youth.

In the 1930s, some thought that the new art of movies would inspire youngsters to fantasies and deeds of violence. Among the Payne Foundation’s studies at the time, the “most conclusive” showed that the movies “did not have any significant effect in producing delinquency,” although the author also found that some predisposed boys and young men would emulate crimes they had seen or try to identify with gangsters.

In the 1950s, crime and horror comic books were attacked for inspiring similar fantasies. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham led a crusade to ban them, based on his interviews with troubled youth who enjoyed adventure comics. To Wertham, they were all corrupting—Batman especially so because of the “subtle atmosphere of homoroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature ‘Batman’ and his young friend ‘Robin.’” The industry responded by adopting a self-censorship code that largely eliminated crime and horror comics.

By the 1960s, TV had largely replaced comics as a source of anxiety, and some psychologists claimed to have scientifically established a causal relationship between violent television and aggressive behavior. Many of these scholars subscribed to the “social learning” school of psychology, which posits that youngsters model their attitudes and behavior on the media’s “symbolic environment” as well as on real-life observation.

Albert Bandura, one of the school’s leading theorists, conducted a famous series of experiments in which nursery school children saw films of both an adult and a cartoon figure hitting a large, bouncy “Bobo doll.” The children were then frustrated, to stimulate aggression, and allowed to hit actual Bobo dolls. Those who had viewed the violent films did so in larger numbers than children in a control group, an effect that was larger for boys than girls.

As with many experiments to follow, the relevance of Bandura’s research to real-world, long-term aggression was questionable. Moreover, social-learning theorists did not assert that all violent entertainment teaches bad behavior and did not argue that media were the only, or even the primary, cause of social problems.

Seymour Feshbach, a psychologist who believed that violent entertainment was more likely to defuse than to stimulate aggression, argued that most children do understand the
difference between fantasy play and antisocial behavior. “It seems likely that the vicarious participation in these [violent] fantasies does satisfy some human needs,” he explained. The social-learning experiments had political appeal, however. They gave an aura of scientific, quantitative certainty to the commonsense notion that people, especially young ones, do absorb attitudes and role models from media entertainment.

Even though a 1972 government study found little evidence that televised violence has “an adverse effect on the majority of children,” its cautious conclusions were often misrepresented as “media effects” theories gained popularity. Government officials continued to sponsor studies, hold hearings, propose legislation and attack media violence, while the complex psychological mechanisms by which different human beings actually process the enormous range of images and ideas in popular culture tended to be forgotten.

By the 1990s, the media-effects theories had triumphed—at least in the political realm. Many politicians and psychologists saw no more room for debate: Hundreds of studies, they insisted, had proven that media violence caused aggression, especially in adolescents and children. Typifying this attitude were Congress’ “findings” in a 1996 law that mandated V-chips in most new TV sets: “Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed and that children exposed to violent video programming are prone to assume that acts of violence are acceptable behavior.”

But Congress never defined “violent video programming,” which could include news, documentaries, cartoons, fictional dramas like *The Miracle Worker*, educational films about the Holocaust or the Civil War, and Shakespearean dramas. Nor did it mention that different schools of psychology hold widely varying views about what causes violence.

What, then, did the studies referenced in the V-chip law actually show? It is useful to understand, first of all, that social-science research inherently involves more subjectivity than does physical-science research, making it difficult to generalize about large-scale, long-term psychological or behavioral effects.

Even those psychologists who believe that media violence significantly influences the young don’t agree about which images or ideas are harmful. What, then, did the studies referenced in the V-chip law actually show? It is useful to understand, first of all, that social-science research inherently involves more subjectivity than does physical-science research, making it difficult to generalize about large-scale, long-term psychological or behavioral effects.

Even those psychologists who believe that media violence significantly influences the young don’t agree about which images or ideas are harmful. Most acknowledge that contextual factors, such as humor or whether the person using violence is punished, influence perceptions. Others think that a “hot” medium like television stimulates excitement or aggression regardless of content.

Even those who believe in a direct connection between media and behavior disagree about the effects. Some say the primary effect is imitation—the “modeling” behavior identified by the social-learning school. Others
think that media violence primarily desensitizes viewers, making them more callous or apathetic toward real-world violence. Still others subscribe to the “mean world” syndrome: that violent entertainment or news reports cause people to become unduly fearful and to perceive the real world as being more brutal than it actually is.

Finally, most of the studies measure aggressive attitudes or behavior, not violence—and there is a big difference. Not all aggression, particularly verbal, is socially disapproved. Neither is all violence—self-defense and sports being two examples. Some studies also distinguish between playful and hurtful aggression or between peer and adult-directed aggression.

Even when psychologists agree on what effects they want to measure, these aspects of human character are inherently difficult to quantify. Researchers not only have differing definitions of aggressive attitudes or behavior, but their measurements often rely on inherently subjective “self-reports” or reports from parents, teachers and peers.

Moreover, as one child psychologist has written, it is “methodologically almost impossible” to prove a link between media violence and criminal behavior because most children in Western societies watch large amounts of TV, so there is no control group of children not exposed to television, nor can researchers separate out all the other social and cultural influences on their developing characters.

The measurement techniques of media violence studies also have limitations. Some are merely reports of clinical cases. Even in studies that do use scientific methods such as random samples and control groups, positive results may be quite small. A “statistically significant” correlation between two “variables”—aggressive behavior and preference for violent television, for example—simply means that the two are found together too often to occur by chance. But the correlation might be quite small; it might not exist in most cases. More important, a correlation tells us nothing about which variable caused the other, or whether in fact some “common third variable” caused the linkage.

One last fact about social science is that studies failing to confirm the researchers’ hypotheses often do not get published. Thus, when pundits say an overwhelming majority of studies confirm a causal hypothesis (even at only a small level of statistical significance), they generally are not taking account of studies that produced “null” results. Nor, of course, are they considering studies by psychologists with different working hypotheses, which attempt to measure such factors as family breakdown, child abuse, drug and alcohol abuse, or availability of firearms. The 1993 report of the National Research Council, Understanding and Preventing Violence, concluded that genetic, social and family influences—not media violence—were the primary determinants of violent behavior.

The studies that do focus on media violence are of three main types. First are laboratory experiments like Bandura’s. Experimenters can predictably induce short-term behavioral effects in a statistically significant number of subjects, but the “very artificiality of the circumstances” and “the brevity of both the TV exposure and the effects being measured” make it questionable whether the results have real-world validity, as pediatrician Victor Strasburger noted in his book, Adolescents and the
Media—Medical and Psychological Impact.

Because it is so difficult to draw conclusions about real-world behavior from lab experiments, psychologists began to conduct field studies, which examine behavior following exposure to violent entertainment in real-world settings. Those results have been inconclusive or inconsistent, however. In one experiment, youngsters became more aggressive after watching “pro-social” programs like “Sesame Street” or “Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood.”

Finally, correlational studies often show a link between aggression and a preference for violent entertainment. But correlations do not demonstrate causation. For example, a series of studies found statistically significant correlations between sales of men’s magazines, such as Playboy and Penthouse, and rape rates in different states. The correlations were explained by a third variable, which the researchers called the “Violence Approval Index”—a measure of “hypermasculine” attitudes accounting both for the high magazine sales and the high rate of assaults.

Similarly, a correlation in one study between reckless behavior by adolescents and their taste for heavy-metal music did not demonstrate that listening to these types of music causes adolescents to behave recklessly. Rather, both reckless behavior and heavy-metal or hard-rock music appeal to adolescents who have an especially high
propensity for sensation seeking. As one researcher said, it is likely that some adolescents find violent lyrics to be cathartic.

To remedy the correlation fallacy, some researchers have conducted “longitudinal” correlation studies. They observed the relation between two variables over time and, through sophisticated statistical techniques, tried to support their hypothesis that the young subjects’ aggression increased as a consequence, at least in part, of earlier television viewing.

One of the most famous of these longitudinal experiments was the so-called Rip Van Winkle study, which examined TV viewing habits and social conduct among a group of rural New Yorkers at ages 8, 19 and 30. The researchers said the data supported a finding of “bidirectionality,” meaning that aggressive tendencies led to increased viewing of violent television, and increased viewing in turn increased aggression. But other longitudinal studies failed to replicate these findings, and some scholars criticized the study’s methods. In a later longitudinal study involving six countries, these researchers obtained overwhelmingly negative results but nevertheless interpreted the findings in the most positive light they could. Dutch researchers participating in the study refused to go along and ultimately published a separate report concluding that the social-learning hypothesis had not been proven.

Those believing that studies have proven media violence to have adverse effects generally adopt a “convergence” argument. They accept the studies’ deficiencies and ambiguities but say they cumulatively reinforce each other. They sometimes use “meta-analysis”—a technique that combines the results of many studies. But if the underlying studies are flawed, blending them hardly strengthens the case for adverse media effects.

None of this means that movies, television, books, music and the Internet have no influence on children’s attitudes and behavior. But the effects vary widely and are difficult to quantify. Generalizations about the effects of art or entertainment on human psyches “do not carry us very far,” psychologist Kevin Durkin has noted. Television “may be implicated” in child development but “in different ways at different points in the lifespan.” Much depends “upon what the child brings to TV viewing.”

Thus, for some people, in some circumstances, some movies, TV shows or video games might evoke a “copycat” effect. For others, the same entertainment might produce revulsion, fear, indignation, boredom or curiosity. Still others consider the same works to provide escapist enjoyment. Some psychologists believe that violent entertainment, like frightening fairy tales, has a cathartic or therapeutic function, allowing viewers to experience excitement and adventure without running any real risk of harm.

At bottom, public concern about violent entertainment probably has more to do with widely shared feelings about the messages and ideas children should receive than with any cause-and-effect relationship that has been, or likely can be, shown. Concerns about the proper upbringing or socialization...
of young people are important. But it is not clear that censorship laws, or even ratings systems that make violent entertainment forbidden and therefore more attractive, are likely to reduce antisocial behavior. Moreover, the high value that Americans place on free expression creates a serious barrier to censorship.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution protects “the freedom of speech,” but exactly what this Delphic phrase means has long been a cause for debate. Intellectual freedom and inquiry, personal growth, the right to blow off steam and the essential role of public discourse in a functioning democracy all are values underlying the constitutional command. The First Amendment protects art, literature, TV sitcoms, action movies and Internet chat rooms just as surely as it protects news reporting and political debate.

But the First Amendment is not absolute. It no more protects perjury, extortion or other types of speech constituting a crime than it prevents Congress or state legislatures from passing laws against invasion of privacy, threats or libel. Even in these instances, however, the First Amendment does impose limits on the prohibitions the government can enforce.

The Supreme Court has also exempted “obscenity” from First Amendment protection. After years of judicial struggle and experimentation, it devised a three-part test. First, the material must depict or describe sexual or excretory activities in a “patently offensive” manner according to local “contemporary community standards.” Second, it must as a whole predominantly appeal to a “prurient”—shameful or morbid—interest in sexual or excretory matters. Third, it must as a whole lack “serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value.”

There has never been an analogous exception for speech or entertainment with violent content—unless it rises to the level of threats, “fighting words” (likely to provoke violence in a face-to-face confrontation) or incitement (speech directed to, and likely to, provoke immediate violent behavior).

The first Supreme Court case to address violent entertainment was Winters v. New York in 1948. The state had banned publications “principally made up of” criminal news, police reports or “pictures or stories of deeds of bloodshed, lust or crime.” The justices invalidated the law because terms like “bloodshed” and “lust” were too vague to put publishers on notice of what was illegal. This vagueness problem would prove endemic to censorship efforts. The category of “violence” is simply too vast and various, and too important a subject of art and literature as well as news, sports and politics, for legal restrictions to be objectively defined.

More recently, a few courts faced with laws restricting minors’ access to entertainment have ruled explicitly that art or entertainment with violent content is constitutionally protected. For example, in 1992, Nassau County, N.Y., passed an ordi-
nance banning distribution to minors of trading cards depicting “a heinous crime, an element of a heinous crime, or a heinous criminal.” Eclipse Enterprises, a producer of trading-card sets with themes like “Crime and Punishment,” “Drug Wars” and “Friendly Dictators” (describing U.S. support of authoritarian regimes) challenged the law on First Amendment grounds. Under the Supreme Court’s “strict scrutiny” test for content-based restrictions on speech, the county argued that its ordinance was “narrowly tailored” to serve a “compelling interest in providing for the well-being of minors.”

Courts in the past had often assumed that protecting youth from sexual images or ideas was a compelling state interest and had not required the government to prove why. In the Eclipse case, the county tried to extend this assumption from sexual images and ideas to violent ones. The trial judge, however, ordered both sides to present evidence on the issue of psychological harm.

Eclipse’s lawyers presented expert testimony that, contrary to popular belief, the research on television violence has yielded inconsistent results at best, with weak or nonexistent evidence of actual effects on children’s behavior, and as to trading cards, there was not a body of research.

The county presented a child psychiatrist, a priest, a rabbi, a victims’ rights advocate and a social worker, all of whom gave their opinions that some crime trading cards could be harmful. But they knew of no studies connecting crime trading cards or other reading material to violent behavior in children and of no actual violence involving children “that could be attributed to crime trading cards.” Nassau County lost the case. Indeed, it is unlikely that any legal evidence could prove that a broad category of entertainment, whether “violent” or “depicting a heinous crime,” has predictable, large-scale imitative effects.

This is no barrier, though, where a specific book, movie, song or TV show allegedly caused harm, usually by inspiring an individual reader or viewer to act out its description of a crime. Aggrieved victims of violent crimes have occasionally—but with very few exceptions, unsuccessfully—sued producers or publishers of specific works that they claim caused a criminal to harm them or their families.

However, holding publishers, authors, producers—or newscasters—liable for the “copycat crimes” of deranged individuals, when thousands or millions of others exposed to the same work were not moved to violence, has dire consequences for free expression. Some of the goriest crimes are depicted in classic works of literature—Hamlet, Macbeth, Oedipus Rex, The Iliad, Crime and Punishment, War and Peace and the Bible. As a judge in one copycat case explained, “If the shield of the First Amendment can be eliminated” by proving that one individual imitated a description of a dangerous activity, then “all free speech becomes threatened.”

Those concerned about the issue of media violence have lately espoused regulatory schemes that don’t...
directly ban violent content but require labels, ratings, filters or V-chips. These devices are often described simply as helpful information or forms of “parental empowerment.” But filter manufacturers and raters, not parents or teachers, are the ones who decide what material is questionable under these systems. The 1996 law requiring V-chips in most new television sets pre-empted the judgments of parents when it listed “sexual, violent or other indecent material” as the categories to be rated and potentially blocked. The problems of vagueness, moreover, are formidable: There is no coherent way for raters to decide what violent content is harmful or inappropriate; and labeling all violence, from war movies to Shakespearean dramas, would target a vast amount of valuable expression.

The problem is even more pronounced in the case of Internet filtering software, which operates either by mechanically blocking World Wide Web sites based on “keyword” identification or by hastily made, subjective judgments about a complex mass of material on thousands of Web sites. Whether or not courts eventually decide that the rating-and-blocking systems violate the First Amendment, the systems do have censorial effects. They pressure producers to steer clear of controversial subjects (particularly to keep from losing advertisers), and they reduce the audience for many of the rated TV shows or for the blocked Web sites.

Proponents of ratings argue that even if the First Amendment bars censorship of violent content for adults, children are different; they are impressionable and vulnerable, likely to get lost in the marketplace of ideas. Yet young people are not without First Amendment rights, and as they mature, those rights become increasingly important to their intellectual development, critical-thinking skills and ability to participate intelligently in the democratic process.

There is serious doubt, moreover, that censoring violent literature or entertainment actually protects youngsters against bad ideas; there are too many other, more potent models for them to imitate if they are disposed to do so. Beyond the First Amendment concerns and the problems of identifying what, if any, depictions of violence are harmful, even a large-scale program of censorship would probably not markedly reduce antisocial behavior and crime. Politicians’ tendency to focus on media entertainment obscures the root causes of violence and, in the long run, probably inhibits rather than advances the search for solutions.

More productive approaches would include controlling access to firearms, addressing poverty and family dysfunction, improving drug and alcohol treatment, and teaching youngsters media literacy, nonviolent dispute resolution and critical thinking.