

TECHNOLOGY

A History of Panic Over Entertainment Technology

By **Christopher J. Ferguson** and **Cathy Faye**

January 1, 2018



J.K. Rofling

This article is part of our special issue “Connected State of Mind,” which explores the impact of tech use on our behavior and relationships. View the complete issue [here](#).

Parents and policy makers are often inundated with frightening claims about media and technology’s effects on kids. In 2014 one British newspaper compared playing video games to using heroin. In 2017, a headline in The Atlantic asked “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” (Answer: no.) For decades, some scholar-activists have taken to comparing the impact of TV violence to smoking on lung cancer. But is there any truth to these claims? Or have some scholars and journalists jumped the shark, as they say?

Since the earliest twentieth century, psychologists have been concerned with

how technology affects health and well-being. In the 1930s, they weighed the effects of listening to the radio. In the 1960s, they turned their attention to television. And in more recent years, they have expanded their research to video games and cell phone use. Psychologists have always been vocal on questions about the long-term effects of entertainment technology.

However, both the past and present debates suggest that answering questions about the pros and cons of entertainment technology is complicated. Research findings have been mixed and therefore not easily translatable into policy statements, news headlines, or advice for parents. This was true in 1960 and it is true today.

If repeated efforts to understand the psychological effects of entertainment technology teach us anything, it's that definite answers may always elude.

Take, for example, debates regarding televised violence and childhood aggression. Between 1950 and 1970, televisions became a standard presence in American homes. However, not everyone believed they were a welcome addition. Parents, educators, and politicians questioned what they saw as excess violence and sexuality on TV.

In 1969, the Surgeon General's Office deemed TV violence a public health problem and called on psychologists to provide definitive evidence on its effects. The million-dollar project was modeled on the well-known Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on health-related risks of tobacco use. It was hoped that evidence from the social and behavioral sciences could similarly close the case on television violence and aggressive behavior.

So, what was the final verdict? According to the 23 commissioned studies and the report that summarized them—it depends. Television might influence some kids, but other factors—parental attitudes, personality, and community violence—also seemed to play a crucial role in aggressive behavior. In sum, the report stated, “Television is only one of the many factors which in time may

precede aggressive behavior. It is exceedingly difficult to disentangle from other elements of an individual's life history."

The findings that televised violence is related to aggression in *some* circumstances for *some* children *some* of the time were not exactly what policymakers were after. Though the findings were mixed and carried limitations, psychologists believed they had demonstrated a relationship between TV violence and aggression and argued that the media had understated it. Newspaper coverage further muddled the waters, with *The New York Times* announcing, "TV Violence Held Unharmful to Youth," and psychologists writing response letters to the editor, stating that a causal relationship had been found. Concerned citizen groups also weighed in, denouncing "sadism and violence" on TV and citing the Surgeon General's report as evidence of its effects. By the end of 1972, it seemed that if the 23 studies had anything definitive to say, it had been mostly lost in translation.

The findings that televised violence is related to aggression in *some* circumstances for *some* children *some* of the time were not exactly what policymakers were after.

By the 1990s, TV took a backseat as attention shifted to violent video games (VVGs). The 1990s saw a wave of school shootings, culminating with the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado. The Columbine shooters were known to be avid fans of the shooter game *Doom*. This incident cemented the notion that VVGs and youth violence were linked.

However, the evidence for this relationship was inconsistent. Evidence suggests VVG use is correlated with decreased crime. Some studies have found that the release of popular VVGs is actually associated with immediate declines in crime.

When these findings were translated into policy statements, headlines, and advice, however, a different storyline emerged. Except this time, scientists themselves were doing the translation. After Columbine, it became common for some scholars to incorrectly imply links between VVGs and mass shootings or

claim the harmful influence of VVGs on aggression was similar to effects of smoking on lung cancer. Others claimed that the Army used VVGs to train soldiers to kill. All such claims have since been discredited. The American Psychological Association (APA) and the American Academy of Pediatrics have made strong claims about the effects of VVGs, despite conflicting research.

These policy statements are now coming under increasing criticism. In 2013, over 230 scholars wrote to the APA to ask them to stop releasing policy statements asserting the presence of effects. Reviews by the governments of Australia, the United Kingdom, and Sweden as well as the Supreme Court of the United States, also concluded evidence could not link VVGs to serious aggression or violence. And in 2017 the APA's own Media Psychology and Technology division released a policy statement warning journalists not to link VVGs to societal violence, noting that evidence for mild aggression is inconsistent.

Perhaps as it's become clearer that evidence linking VVGs to problem behavior just isn't there, and as gamers reach middle adulthood, the furor over VVGs has decreased. The last outbreak of moral panic over VVGs occurred during the 2012 Sandy Hook shooting, although this period was also marked by considerable pushback against the idea that the VVGs contribute to mass shootings. (It also turned out in the official investigation that the shooter mostly played the non-violent game *Dance, Dance Revolution*.)

Since then, panics over technology have moved into other spaces, particularly social media and smartphone use. Some of these concerns have centered on suicide, where claims have been made that social media, smartphones and TV shows such as *Thirteen Reasons Why* are associated with increased suicide risk in teens. These claims evoke the panic over Ozzy Osbourne's "Suicide Solution" song from the 1980s.

One-size-fits-all policy efforts or recommendations to parents based on sweeping generalizations when data is inconsistent are, in the end, likely to do more harm than good.

Regarding shows such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*, one of us (Chris) is currently conducting a statistical review of studies of fictional media and suicide. An early impression of this field is that studies are messy, often flawed, and produce inconsistent results. Overall, it does not appear that the evidence is able to support claims linking media to suicide.

As for smartphones and social media, once again, data linking new technology to suicide is limited. Beliefs seem to rest on observations that teen suicides, particularly among girls, have risen in recent years (although they still remain lower than the early 1990s). However, suicides have increased for middle aged adults as well, suggesting a larger cultural issue, not one specific to teen tech use. Current evidence suggests that, overall, screen time is a poor predictor of mental health issues in youth, although how one uses screens (such as authentic self-presentation versus negative self-comparison) can correlate with mood.

Behavioral science has much to say about the risks and benefits of new technologies, but these issues are complicated and controversial. In the case of the 1970s debates about television, psychologists presented a rich body of research that told a complex story about the link between TV violence and childhood aggression, suggesting (as science often does) the relationship was context dependent. The nuanced scientific interpretations present in the studies, complete with outlines of limitations and recognition of the importance of contextual variables, was interpreted by many as evidence of a weak or nonexistent relationship. Conversely, public statements on VVGs have omitted conflicting findings, resulting in strong and unsubstantiated claims about VVGs and aggression.

Although it is tempting and often beneficial to share psychology's expertise on pressing social issues, it is also important to consider the strength of the

evidence and how it may be used by a wider public. The kinds of answers science can provide often counter the interests of policymakers looking for data to support an agenda or media looking to capture readers with alarming, bite-sized headlines. If repeated efforts to understand the psychological effects of entertainment technology teach us anything, it's that definite answers may always elude. One-size-fits-all policy efforts or recommendations to parents based on sweeping generalizations when data is inconsistent are, in the end, likely to do more harm than good.



Christopher J. Ferguson

Christopher J. Ferguson is a professor of psychology at Stetson University. He has conducted dozens of studies examining the impact of TV, video games and other media effects on aggression, violence, body image, and mental health. He is coauthor of the book *Moral Combat: Why the War on Violent Video Games is Wrong* (with Patrick M. Markey), as well as the mystery novel *Suicide Kings*.

🐦 Twitter



Cathy Faye

Cathy Faye is a historian of psychology and the assistant director of the Cummings Center for the History of Psychology at the University of Akron. She is past president of the American Psychological Association's Society for the History of Psychology.

Further Reading & Resources

- Markey, P.M., & Ferguson, C.J. (2017) *Moral combat: Why the war on video games is wrong*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books. ([Link](#))
- Ferguson, C.J. (2015). Do angry birds make for angry children? *Huffington Post*. ([Link](#))
- Markey, P. M., Males, M. A., French, J. E., & Markey, C. N. (2015). Lessons from Markey et al. (2015) and Bushman et al. (2015): Sensationalism and integrity in media research. *Human Communication Research*, 41(2), 184-203. ([Link](#))

- Weingart, P. (1998). Science and the media. *Research Policy*, 27, 869-879. ([Link](#))
 - Cater, D. & Strickland, S. (1975). *TV violence and the child: Evolution and fate of the Surgeon General's report*. New York, NY: Russel Sage Foundation. ([Link](#))
-