For the last year I have been part of an interdisciplinary research team in Iceland involved in a research project called “Gender, youth and violence”\(^1\). The overall foci of this research can be divided into two parts. On one hand we are interested in what kind of violence young people (14 to 20 years old) encounter and what constitutes as violence in their minds. On the other hand, we are interested in exploring the effects violence has on young people’s experiences and how they construe the relation between gender and violence. This is still work in progress but I want to present you here with part of the results from our analysis of the media.

Moore argues that “violence of all kinds is engendered in its representation, in the way it is thought about and constituted as a social fact” (1994: 70). In our research we are concerned with the gendered ways violence speaks to its audience in the public sphere which, in an ideal feminist world, should belong equally to every individual (Kappeler, 1995:32). Not that we have any illusion that this is the case agreeing with Nancy Fraser (1990, quoted in Kozol, 1995) when she points out that the public sphere is neither neutral nor apolitical but rather is shaped by hierarchies of power. The knowledge produced and reproduced takes its cue from these power relations as do the channels available for speaking. The way violence is cooked and served to its audience is in other words not innocent or objective. It carries messages about the ‘dangers’ in the big, wide world and insofar as it portrays men and women differently in relation to these ‘dangers’ addresses them in different ways. It also features stories or accounts of violence meant to entertain. We were interested in the gendered appeal of these stories and how they are used to titillate us.

Our research was in part inspired by the many assertions that have been made that pornography is becoming more and more visible in the public sphere in Iceland, and with it, violence to women. Pole dancing and nightclubs with strippers have mushroomed in downtown Reykjavik and the internet offers easy access to porn for everyone who is interested or just curious, including youngsters. The head of the emergency room for victims of sexual assault in one of the hospitals in Iceland recently voiced her concerns about what she feels is an increase in violent sexual offences and rapes in Iceland and how young women feel pressured to subject themselves to rough sexual activities (Vera, 2003:3).

Sample

\(^1\) This research is organised by Irma Erlingsdóttir at The Women’s Research Institute in Iceland. Other members of the team are Páll Biering, Sólveig Anna Bóasdóttir and Steinunn Hrafnasdóttir. Hildur Fjóla Antonsdóttir and Sólrún Engilbertsdóttir collected the data, coded the material and conducted the statistical analysis.
When deciding on the constitution of our media sample our attention was drawn to the journals or newsletters published in vocational schools and junior colleges. These are interesting for various reasons. One of the reasons is that the journals are edited and written by the students and for many constitute the first step or experience of expressing their own thoughts and articles publicly. The tradition of publishing school journals is also well established in Icelandic colleges. In other words, by comparing recent issues with some older ones we should be able to map or chart out changes in public expressions of violence and gender. At this time point we don’t have enough data to make statistical comparisons between different years but we aim to do so in the near future. Other media represented in our sample were selected after consulting a media market research poll. These included ‘Fókus’ a weekly supplement that comes with one of the newspapers in Reykjavik and ‘Undirtónar’ a monthly newsletter distributed free of charge, mostly focusing on entertainment, music, computer games and so on, but aimed at young people. Finally we analysed some music programmes on TV. Here I will focus on the textual part of the sample but altogether it consisted of 305 units.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Sample of media texts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fókus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undirtónar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*One unit is one article.

**Method of analysis**

We had a big sample and needed to be able to process it fairly speedily. The questions we were asking: how much violence was represented, what kind of violence is being described, who writes and how, called for methods that would allow us to account for trends in clear terms. In the end we decided to do a classical content analysis where texts are systematically classified into fewer content categories and these categories then counted. The underlying assumption is that there is a relation between the frequency a text unit appears and its importance (see e.g. Bauer, 2000; Berelson, 1952, Holsti, 1969). We had no illusions that this method would give great in-depth insight into the complex nuances in the relationship between gender and violence. However, it presents us with a coarse picture, painted in broad brushstrokes. We figured that we could always go back to the data and use more in depth qualitative analyses that would allow us to interpret the texts in more complex and refined way.

When doing content analysis you have to predefine the concepts you are going to code to ensure consistency both in the way texts are chosen for the sample and then in the way the texts are analysed. Traditionally content analyses of violence in the media have tended to focus on overt depictions of violent acts, such as credible threat or actual use of physical force meant to harm or intimidate (e.g. Gunter, 2002, Smith and Donnerstein, 1998). We felt that a definition of this kind was rather narrow and possibly reflecting the tendency men have to see physical violence as the paradigm form of violence (see Hearn, 1996). None of the studies we reviewed seem to have looked at the violence that can be contained in the actual writing style of the texts. Texts do not just describe violence, they can be violent in themselves and used to humiliate or degrade other individuals and groups. Pornographic language is an example of a powerful tool to denigrate and we tried to make our coding frame sensitive to this.
Constructing the coding frame was a difficult task and certainly convinced us that violence does not travel in neat and tidy packages which then can be labelled at will. The coding frame was devised by us and built around the assumptions that most articles and news items are built up as a narrative. Harold D. Lasswell’s formula of mass communication where the focus is on: “Who says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?” (1946) guided our approach. The components of our coding frame which ended up containing 58 different codes, can be broken down into the following:

1. Basic information about unit (e.g. where it comes from),
2. Information about author
3. Illustrations (e.g. do they show violence)
4. Coding of narrative
5. Physical violence
   a) Kind of violence
   b) Perpetrator/s
   c) Victim/s
   d) Consequences
6. Denigration
   a) Kind of denigration
   b) Perpetrator/s
   c) Victim/s
   d) Consequences
7. Coders rate on scales from 1-5 (1=little, 5=much) how violent, denigrating and pornographic the unit is.

To see whether the coding frame was being used in a consistent and reliable way we checked the degree to which the coders were in agreement about firstly the units selected for analysis and secondly the coding of the content. The coders consistently chose the same articles and inter-rater reliability proved to be good, on average the agreement was 91%.

Main results

Over the whole we saw some interesting relations between gender and violence. The reasons for selecting the units were the following:

Table 2. Reason/s for including textual unit in sample (coder could choose more than one reason)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons for selecting units* \ Name of medium</th>
<th>School Journals (n=171)</th>
<th>Fókus* (n=67)</th>
<th>Undírtónar** (n=67)</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Used degrading language or/and symbolism</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>40.3</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Described physical violence</td>
<td>43.3</td>
<td>32.8</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used pornographic language or/and symbolism</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>47.8</td>
<td>25.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to abusive ideology e.g. racism</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References to threats</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual violence</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological violence</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2 For a full version of the coding frame please contact either annadis.rudolfsdottir@uwe.ac.uk or fem@hi.is.
A weekly supplement with one of the newspapers
A monthly newsletter distributed free of charge

A lot of the authors chose not to put their names under their texts, in particular when these contained pornographic references. When we could establish who the author was, the overwhelming majority of the text units written were authored by men and perhaps this explains in part some of our main results.

The findings concur with results from other studies of violence in the media, be it radio, TV or music videos; in that the perpetrators of violent acts tended to be males (Rich et al, 1998, Women’s Media Watch, 2000). In our case we found that the victims of physical violence were also predominantly males, but other studies show that the victims can equally be male or female (Rich et al, 1998; Women’s Media Watch, 2000).

In line with other research into violence as entertainment (e.g. Wilson et al. 1997, 1998) our analysis showed that the consequences of the violent act are given scant if any thought. The act almost stands alone as violence in itself and constitutes the spectacle.

The status of violence as entertainment was obvious in this sample as a fair proportion of the violence described was fictional. As such it carries on with tradition young adults are well familiar with. Content analysis conducted by Wilson et al. (2002) showed that television programmes targeted at children younger than 12 contain more violence than other types of programming. Video games which are popular with youngsters also tend to focus on violence and traditional gender roles (Dietz, 1998).

Table 3. Acts of violence described in texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acts of violence</th>
<th>Real</th>
<th>Fictional*</th>
<th>Fantasy**</th>
<th>All</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical violence</td>
<td>19.5% (23)</td>
<td>19.5% (23)</td>
<td>6.8% (8)</td>
<td>45.8% (54)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual violence</td>
<td>3.3% (6)</td>
<td>5.9% (7)</td>
<td>0.8% (1)</td>
<td>11.9% (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Killing</td>
<td>15.3% (18)</td>
<td>20.3% (24)</td>
<td>6.8% (8)</td>
<td>42.4% (50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>39.8% (47)</td>
<td>45.8 (54)</td>
<td>14.4% (17)</td>
<td>100% (118)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Describing a violent event in a book, film or e.g. computer game
** The author places himself as main protagonists in the story and tells a story as if it really happened. The exaggerated nature of the story shows however that it is fictional.

The coders had rated on a scale from 1 to 5 how violent they found the actions described. It was the violent acts themselves which were rated as most violent out of the features we coded in the text.

Our analysis stands apart from other content analyses in that it allows us to code the violence of the text itself. As I mentioned before most of the units in our sample found their way there because they described or were written in such a way that they were denigrating to other groups. In our analysis texts that used expressions that could be defined as degrading or humiliating for another individual or groups were usually written by male authors but, interestingly, the objects of the degrading descriptions were usually women. Most of the degrading comments were aimed at belittling individuals or group of individuals by e.g. doubting their intelligence, but a substantial part of the degrading comments, especially when aimed at women, were sexual or pornographic in nature. These misogynistic representations
were most often veiled as a joke or compliment to the person/s being described and often seemed to serve the purpose of elevating the status of the male-author of the text.

Table 4. Denigration or humiliation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Percentage of all</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Sexually degrading references or symbols</td>
<td>22.1% (44)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Insults, belittling comments aimed at individual or group</td>
<td>71.4% (142)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both 1 and 2</td>
<td>4.5% (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2.0% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>100% (199)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The inclusion of school journals in the sample inflates somewhat the percentage of general insults aimed at individuals or groups. These tend to be light-hearted and many are aimed at first year students and are a way to initialise them into the school.

I now want to narrow my focus somewhat and look at some of the patterns we detected with in the school journals. These journals constitute the public space available for students for getting their voice heard and are recognised as the public voice of the students outside of the school. Bearing this in mind, we found some of the results from our study quite disconcerting.

What concerned us most was the absence of female voices in general. In 92.8% of the cases the authors of the texts were students. When the sex of the author could be determined the overwhelming majority were male, or 77.8%. We could only determine 18.9% as being female. The main themes were usually school life, entertainment, relation between men and women and violence. The style was in general light-hearted, 88 out of 171 texts seemed to be written with the intention of entertaining the reader and not meant to be taken too seriously.

A popular writing style and one which characterised the school papers more than other media we looked at (except perhaps music videos were a band member can be involved in a fictional story as himself), was to write a fantasy story in the first person. What characterised these texts was their excessive and sometimes surreal storyline. Here is one example, an editorial from an old, respected college in Iceland printed on an expensive glossy paper.

Another miserable day has passed. Work is disgusting, also the people there, not to mention the customers. I enjoy thinking up ways to murder them when they walk in through the door. It is my only enjoyment at work. If I worked in a café I would spit snot into their coffees. It does not improve when I return home; the bloody cow is always nagging. At least she can be used for one thing, she better be up for it this evening (An editorial, MR, 2001).

Another example from the same journal.

The benefit of breast-fucks is that you can tune your hold as required by pushing the breasts harder at the cock, like with a screwdriver. This position also allows you to come straight into the face of the girl without any effort [...] We would prefer if it all went into the eyes and for the poor thing to turn blind, but only temporarily (MR, 2001: 167)

One school paper stuck out from the others because it was edited by women and the photographer was a woman. The editorial board had obviously tried to build up a bit of a momentum for the paper as they had been promising their readers a “surprise”. The surprise proved to be photographs of fellow female students posing like glamour models.
Kappeler points out that: “as women, as the targets of sexism, we know that the problem is less the content of the attitude to our ‘sex’ than the structure of our definition as a ‘sex’” (1995:42). It is interesting that the young women in this school chose to position themselves so explicitly as a ‘sex’. The pictures come across as a kind of striptease where the young women have not yet taken off the final garments and as such can be read in multiple ways. Did these young women see it as an act of power or fun? Or are these photos merely symptomatic of the lack of imagination we have when it comes to representing women, and an example of how poor the images young women have to reflect themselves against and try for fit? As Fiske (1987: 205), in his discussion of masculine discourses in TV put it, they “are taught to admire and desire that which rejects them in a typical piece of double-talk”.

**Concluding remarks**

In many respects this study poses more questions than it provides answers. It looks at presences and absences in relation to how violent topics are produced up and represented in public domains that, at least in the case of the school journals, have explicitly been carved out for young people to relate to other young people. As such it is not singular in not including women. A popular quiz in state TV in Iceland shows the different colleges competing against each other. There, like in the school journals, the young women are more likely to be spectators, looking in from the sidelines and not actually stepping into the competitive fray.

The patterns we see in the different media take their cue from popular discourses in society, and as such are not an aberration from but a reflection of the power relations between men and women in society. As such they give prominence to masculine desires and fantasies, where women are acted on rather than acting with. Whereas, men relate violently to other men through physical violence, the violence against women more predominantly takes its form through degrading definitions that more often than not fixes them in the status of the sexual object.

**REFERENCES**


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