If the 'anti-effects' arguments claiming that television has no effect on viewers' behaviour were applied to the influence parents have on their children's behaviour, they would read something like this:

The view that parents influence how their children grow up is widespread. However, there are theoretical problems with such a crude 'effects' approach, in what is obviously a very complex and highly mediated area. Firstly, research results have been inconclusive. In laboratory conditions many children were observed not to do as told when given instructions by parents. Other children, asked if they always obeyed their parents, replied, "No you man," and, "You must be joking." Such children were therefore concluded to be "rejecting" and "negotiating" parental messages.

Some commentators go further, arguing that how children are brought up has "no effect" on their subsequent growth and development. Asserting that the whole 'effects' debate may be wrongly instituted, they argue that children may well only "agree" with parents when they are already predisposed to, so that parental 'effects' may merely be the reinforcement of existing systems of beliefs and attitudes. The popular obsession with parenting and its influence, other theorists worry, is part of a general propensity to look back to a mythical golden age when children obeyed their parents without question. The idea, in short, is that Right has assembled a powerful ideological package to blame parents for wider social ills, placing them in a long line of scapegoats for (alleged) increases in violence, crime and the corruption of youth. Part of this package is this dwelling on a mythical past. The moral panic around parenting is a music for the reactionary social fears of moral campaigners. Despite an enormous research effort, no link between so-called parental socialisation effects and the subsequent behaviour of children can be found.

In other words, when applied to other areas of social life 'anti-effects' arguments can suddenly look extremely dubious. Lab experiments may be inadequate; politicians may have their own agendas; but these facts say nothing about the nature of the socialisation process, or about the 'real' influence on children of parents, or on viewers of media. Parental socialisation of children is not simply a matter of telling them what they must do: though often unaware of it, children do also absorb patterns of behaviour, potential responses to situations, a sense of what is funny or fearful. Of course, whether any of this is true of children is socialised by television would have to be researched in its own right.

It's often argued that media are merely scapegoats in political polemics. Robert Potts, writing in The Guardian (22 March 1996), is typical: "The fact is that, once again, film and video are becoming the scapegoats for the horrors which they only represent. There have been countless examples of such reactions; and the history of such examples effectively gives the lie to the idea that a new popular medium poses a unique threat to society suddenly poisoned. Theatre, cheap paperbacks, music hall, rock and roll music, punk, horror comics, and the cinema have all in their turn provoked fears of the corruption of youth and the disintegration of public order, until a new medium claimed the attention."

However frequently put forward, this 'scapegoat' argument says nothing of the influence of media on the development of different types of behaviour, and certainly proves nothing about the non-existence of such influence. Moreover, it diverts us from the central issue, which is to understand the nature of any impact media might have. It is strange that Potts, a journalist attempting to convince his readers, should be committed to the media's lack of influence. On the contrary, we believe the media to be powerful channels for the development of new ideas and potential behaviour. For the 'authorities' have often been quite correct (in their terms) to see new media as calling for the 'disintegration of public order'. The radical press in nineteenth-century Britain was profoundly revolutionary - this is why the authorities attempted to proscribe it. Who imagines that Bertolt Brecht's or Dennis Potter's plays are intended to be anything other than subversive? For the powerful, new ideas can be dangerous - and new (or old) media can certainly develop them.

Innocent of culture
Some laboratory experiments are clearly and seriously inadequate, models attempting to measure social life with chemical or biological process. Emerging from positivist social science, such oversimplified stimulus-response research is unable to study the processes of sense-making which inevitably occur between the media and their audiences: these accounts tend to remain innocent of the notion of audiences as 'active', and to 'blame parents' for wider social ills without understanding how the audiences interpret and by which audiences understand and interpret meaning. Rarely are the systems of meaning surrounding portrayals of violence examined: for example, whether it is seen as 'legitimate' or 'enjoyable'. Instead, media content is analysed by means of static and a priori categories concerning the degree of 'graphic' or 'explicit' portrayals of violence.

The irony is that much of the research concluding that there are limited 'effects' depends on equally stunted positivist methodology. Much comes from social psychology; and as Willard Rowland has shown (in his 1983 study The Politics of TV Violence: Policy Uses of Communication Research) much is angriest with the in-house audiences departments of the broadcasters themselves, limited effects being conducive to the legitimisation of the television business.

Alternatives to such research are hard to find, however; critical work in this area is very much lacking. Sociologists have tended to leave the field to psychologists. Quine is said to have been in a state of panic when television and violence have been ignored, played down or regarded with weary disdain. One reason for this is the rise of theories of the "active audience", which have pushed "questions of influence almost entirely off the agenda" (John Corner et al., in 1990's Nuclear Reactions: Form and Response in Public Issue Television). Reception theory has tended to emphasise the ability of media audiences to interpret what they see, and to bring their own experience and critical faculties to media texts. But such 'active audience' theory inhibits the investigation of the role of the media in forming and changing people, societies, cultures and governments. And while in different areas the work of critical theorists relies on the development of new ideas and political orientations (and statements) about media power and the reproduction of ideologies, even they have tended, when discussing violence, to go along with the argument about audience 'activity'.

A desperately bad argument
This reluctance to acknowledge any media effects in the area of violence pushes otherwise critical authors towards inadquate arguments about
media power. For example, the counterargument against any analogy with advertising often recurs (as here, in Martin Barker et al’s ‘Proposed text of statement’ circulated following publication of Elizabeth Newson’s Video Violence and the Protection of Children in March 1994): “It is commonly argued that the media must have effects, or advertisers would not spend so much money on advertising products”. Sadly, this is a desperately bad argument – not because it is necessarily untrue, but because it makes the absurd assumption that there is only one kind of ‘effect’ that a programme, or an advertisement, can have. With advertisements, for example, we know that among their most likely ‘effects’ are to make consumers aware of the product, to make them feel that if they belong to a certain group then this product might be part of their lives, and to make them make associations between the product and other things which they value, or aspire to. There is nothing as simple as ‘causing people to go out and buy’. If we therefore relate that to ‘violent’ films, it becomes quite clear that this is no argument at all for seeing films as ‘causing violence’. We would have to ‘argue’ to any student who could not see the crude fallacies in that argument.

Luckily for us we are not students of these authors, or we too would have our assignments failed. We cannot see the crude fallacies here – nor are we able to avoid concluding that the authors actually believe that advertisements do have ‘ Effect ‘ consequences. If consumers are made aware of a product, or to make associations with it, or to feel that they belong, these are certainly already ‘consequences’ (if they then go out and buy, as many of us in fact do, further consequences are added). Languages are systems of meaning, but only a foolish analyst would suggest that these are ‘interferences’. If necessary, the use of language has no effects. Reception theorists may emphasise the centrality of meaning in the production and circulation of beliefs and ideologies, and will maintain that meaning depends on interpretation. But to do so says nothing about the possibility or existence of effects (see John Corner’s 1995 Television Form and Public Address). Clearly ‘language’ has ‘consequences on belief and behaviour, whether we think of these as orders being issued and obeyed, or in terms of identification and positive evaluations of role models. The key point here is that even if we acknowledge an intervening process of meaning and interpretation, it is still the case that sometimes when people buy advertised products – as all of us at some time will – this is a result, or a consequence (or an effect) of the advertisement.

To show that fiction never influences perceptions and behaviour, it is often argued that people are able to distinguish easily between factual and fictional media, and between fantasy and reality. But being able to recognise that fantasies are not reality does not mean (for example) that fantasies of power and control, or of victimisation and subordination, play no role in ‘real’ events and actions. Since fictional models may extend what people believe is possible in practice, questions about processes of influence are hardly invalidated.

In relation to children, the argument is predicated on notions of ‘play’ as an inherently positive, creative and assimilative form of learning. It is sometimes argued that such fantasies or ‘pleasures’ are usually a positive feature (sometimes intrinsically positive) of the imaginary worlds in which problems can be solved and resentments and aggression dissipated. But as Stephen Kline (in Out of the Garden: Toys and Children’s Culture in the Age of TV Marketing, his 1993 study of toy marketing) argues, “play activities exhibited with contemporary toys reveal evidence of imitative learning in which children accommodate their mental schema to prevailing attitudes and norms in society. Two aspects of toy marketing seem to stress these imitative aspects of pretend. The first is the narrow scripting of the associated television animations to elicit carefully targeted play values. The second is the way most toy advertisements model repeatedly a style of play which replicates the television scripts in the depiction of children’s play behaviour.”

Furthermore, as Ros Coward has argued in relation to children’s programming, and especially in programming associated with advertising toys, ‘violence and owning weapons is seen as a vital part of masculine identity... Films and TV programmes currently directed at boys teach about power. Power in these fantasies is to be different from girls; power is the possibility of annihilating opposition and frustration; the means to that power is through guns and the military. For feminists the whole question of the relationship between fantasy and reality has always been a...pressing political question... Women feel that many aspects of the cruel and unfair treatment which they receive at the hands of men is precisely because, in interpersonal relationships, men live out socially approved fantasies of what women are and what women want.” (Marxism Today, December 1987).

**Folk devils and hooligans**

So critical theorists study the media because they think them powerful, but then won’t say so when discussing violence. This apparent anomaly arises because the debate about effects is seen as a cover for a reactionary political agenda. Those who advance arguments for media effects are assumed to be doing so for undisclosed ulterior motives on censorship: “Again and again it has been demonstrated that the use of the ‘media’ as acts for other kinds of social concern... It must be a matter for serious concern that much that calls itself ‘research’ has been distorted by an inability to see beyond the vague categories and embodied fears of moral campaigning.” (Barker et al., 1994.)

The tendency is thus to displace the argument onto the terrain of censorship, with the Left (as Coward also noted in Marxism Today) alloying itself with liberals and libertarians in an anti-censorship position, and critics of that position caricatured as ‘moral’ campaigners. Yet the question of the influence of the media is separate from decisions about regulation and censorship. It is a risky divergence, however, to attempt to have it both ways. The alternative to ‘no effects’ can be advanced about the relationship between social institutions, the media, the public and outcomes.

Thus, in a 1994 letter circulated with the ‘Proposed text of statement’ responding to the Newson report, Martin Barker argued explicitly for an alliance based on a negative position: “We are aware that inevitably, and rightly, there will be differences and areas for debate among many of us about precisely how to frame our own positive positions. That is why it seems right, in the first instance, to take up an essentially negative position.”

The negative position includes critiques of political agendas, and of the framing of debates on violence, concentrating on theories of ‘respectable fears’ and the ‘moral panic’, as evolved via Stan Cohen’s Folk Devils and Moral Panics (1973) and Geoff Pearson’s Hooligan: A History of Respectable Fears (1983). Classic texts, both are somewhat limited in their explanatory power and have been rather overplayed in the development of defences against censorship. Pearson’s Hooligan deconstructs the notion that a stable, domestically peaceful, traditional ‘British way of life’ has suddenly been plunged into an unnatural state of disorder. Pearson valuably highlights the regularities and absurdities of some media and public debate on violence in society, and reveals the peculiar historical forgetting of the intimate part violence has played in British history, both in the sense of ‘law and order’, and in the sense of the imperialist violence which British status and power were built on. He argues that “for generations Britain has been plagued by the same fears and problems as today.”

But though he carefully notes that “social circumstances do change,” he does tend to imply that the past is always viewed with a rosy tint: “Without a shadow of doubt, each era has been sure of the truthfulness of its claim that things were getting steadily worse, and equally confident in the tranquility of the past – although, significantly, there have always been those who questioned whether the problem had enlarged in the public mind. Each era has also understood itself as standing at a point of radical discontinuity with the past, but when we reconnect these bursts of discontent into a continuing history of deterioration, must not the credibility snap – unless, that is, we judge ourselves to be in a worse condition than the poor, brutalised human beings who suffered the worst effects of the Industrial Revolution?”

Though suggestive, this is untrue. We do not always ‘look back’ to a mythical past which is better or more orderly than our own is presumed to be. For example, at the end of the nineteenth century, British society was explicitly and more set than during the earlier periods of industrialisation (thus, H. G. C. Matthew writes, in ‘The Liberal Age’ in 1992’s The Oxford History of Britain, “Though political rioting did not altogether disappear, it became infrequent enough to encourage widespread comment. Crime on the mainland, both in the form of theft and of acts of violence, declined absolutely as well as relatively... The Criminal Registrar noted in 1901 that, since the 1840s, ‘we have witnessed a great change in manners: the substitution of words without blows for blows with or without words; an approximation in the manners of different classes; a decline in the spirit of lawlessness’.”)

Moreover, the judgment about whether we perceive ourselves to be in a worse condition than the ‘brutalised’ human beings of the Industrial Revolution is of a quite different order to a judgment or analysis of the prevalence of interpersonal violence.

**When society frays**

Clearly there are both differences and similarities between the 1890s and the 1990s. But the ‘mythical past’ argument is not in itself evidence that the level and type of violence and the extent of
social disintegration in contemporary society have not changed in the last 20 years. The incidence of murder, child murder, assault or rape are all empirical questions, and many people perceive a recent increase in their own personal vulnerability to violence. Stuart Hall, a key critic of the media tendency to exaggerate violence for particular ends, has nevertheless stated that, "There can be little doubt that the character and pattern of violence has changed. Most people, including myself, now feel personally more vulnerable than they did in the recent past." (The Observer, 29 August 1993). Hall argued that for most of us, social conditions have declined under successive Conservative administrations, not just materially but also at the level of culture and representation. But the 'mythical past' model would dismissively consign such opinions to 'respectable fears'.

The remainder of the anti-effects argument is as follows: levels of violence and crime are exaggerated in public debate (meaning the media), usually in order to further the ends of the powerful. 'Moral panic' theory argues that totalitarian societies reinforce social control in reaction to perceived threats to societal order. Cohen, the theory's original proponent, states that moral panic occurs when [a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) restored to.

The 'moral panic' has since become a regular shorthand for dismissing fears about links made between sex, violence and power at the level of individual understanding, perception and public beliefs about mental illness. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.

Miller also found that 42 percent of respondents from Britain were unwilling to visit Northern Ireland, almost all because, as they said, they were afraid of the threat to personal safety of violence. News reporting of the conflict was the clearest cause of this. As one respondent told Miller, "[Because of what I hear on TV] I believe it to be very violent."

Media information can also raise awareness of problems not previously considered important. For example, as the Glasgow Media Group have shown in their forthcoming book Media, Propaganda and the Medico, beliefs were examined concerning the killing of three IRA members in Gibraltar in March 1988. Some respondents believed that the IRA members had been armed, had planted a bomb and made suspicious movements when challenged; some 45 percent of the sample believed that a central witness was a prostitute. All these details - supplied by media and/or government sources - were false.