Portrayals of Violence in the Media

The first Act amending the Protection of Young Persons Act came into force on 1st July 2008. It improves the protection of children and adolescents from portrayals of violence in the media, in particular computer games dominated by violence. The indexing criteria referred to in the Act relating to portrayals of violence in the media have been extended and made more precise. The legislator has made it clear that "Media in which acts of violence, such as scenes of murder and slaughter, are portrayed as an end in themselves and in detail or in which taking the law into one's own hands is suggested as the only proven way of getting supposed justice" are dangerous to young people.

General criteria for portrayals of violence

- **Detailed portrayals of acts of violence as an end in themselves, in particular scenes of murder and slaughter**

- **The media content suggests taking the law into one's own hands as the only proven way of getting supposed justice**

- **The media content is brutalizing and incites to violence**

  According to the Central State Agency's decision practice, these elements of an offence are present

  - **If the media action generally is characterized by acts of violence and killings, taking the context into consideration.**
    Acts of violence and killings can be considered to characterize media action generally if, for example, the action is based solely or mainly on the use of brutal force or on killings and/or if violence is portrayed on a grand scale and in great detail.

    and / or

  - **If violence is legitimized or justified.**
    This is the case if
    - The use of violence is portrayed as justified and normal when it is in the name of the law or for the sake of a supposedly good thing or for gain, whereas in reality it negates law and order,
    - Violence is portrayed in a positive way as a means of obtaining pleasure or enhancing one's social status.

    and / or

  - **If violence and its consequences are played down**
    In some cases, playing down the consequences of violence can have the effect of minimizing violence and, in conjunction with other aspects (such as thematic integration, reference to reality), it may therefore be harmful to young people unless the nature of the depiction or a serious treatment of the violent content makes the necessary distancing clear.

In order to understand and analyse these connections it may be useful to take a look at the following aspects of the media action:

- **Victims of acts of violence**
  Media portrayals in which acts of violence against people and human-like beings characterize the action generally, or in which such acts of violence are portrayed in detail as an end in themselves, are to be considered as dangerous to young people. 'Human-like beings' means beings that are similar to humans according to objective criteria relating to the external features of the character. Violence, according to the above portrayal, against people and human-like beings may have a dangerous effect on young people if the victims who are injured or killed react in a "human" way.

  Killing purely imaginary characters or animals has to be regarded in a different way to killing people and human-like beings. However, if killing animals, for example, is done as a meaningless massacre for its own ends, this may contribute to brutalization in a given context with a problematic content.

- **Contact with reality in portrayals of violence**
  In principle, realistically portrayed acts of violence should be regarded as more dangerous to young people than those where violence is portrayed in an abstract way. Settings to which young persons will readily relate or which are true to life are more likely to intensify dangerous effects upon young people than those which are integrated into contexts to which young persons will not readily relate and/or which are futuristic or fantasy-based.

- **Genre**
  Other aspects to be taken into account when considering the possible endangering effects on children and young people of carrier and telemedia with violent content are the genre to which the particular medium belongs (e.g. fantasy or horror) and the dramatic and visual depiction typical of the genre, though these do not *per se* legitimize the verdict that the portrayals of violence are dangerous to young persons. On the other hand they are not automatically excluded from being youth endangering because of the genre.

Additional criteria for interactive media / computer games (with regard to acts of violence against people or human-like beings)

Some further criteria for endangerment of young people that apply to interactive media are

- If there are few or no alternative options for action / resolving conflict;

- If the choice of alternative options for action / ways of resolving conflict in interactive media does exist, but is detrimental or irrelevant from the point of view of the object of the game;

- If the use of corresponding violence seems to be not a problem or normal within society, is not attended by any negative consequences or punishment, or is rewarded in the context of the game;

- If violence against onlookers who are not involved is part of the game and incurs few or no penalties.

The control / operation of the game should be taken into account in interactive media.

Reasons for not indexing

As well as deciding what should be indexed, the boards also have to deal with the question of which media content should not be indexed. On the basis of decisions by the board of twelve representatives where it was decided not to index, in the sphere of data media programmed with games this comprises:

- Games in which injuring and/or killing people is only one of several possible courses of action in the game and the result of a fight is shown as without bloodshed;

- Games in which other elements apart from acts of violence against people play a significant part;

- Games in which events where people are killed are defamiliarized and portrayed in a form that does not suggest parallels with reality;

- Games in which the victims of killings are exclusively beings that are not similar to humans;

- Games that contain horror and splatter elements but where the game is determined by non-violent content. In this context the horror elements must not be such that the particular brutality pushes the other elements of the game into the background;

In the sphere of data media programmed with films:

- If the content of the video films is not considered to be something young people will readily relate to;

- If the content of the video films is such that the typical popular figure does not appear as a character with whom young people will identify;

- If there is no reason to expect copycat effects;

- If portrayals of violence can be classed as exaggerated, repulsive and/or unrealistic;

- If the use of violence remains within the legally permissible frame and/or the use of violence is rejected in principle.

Impairment of physical well-being is not a reason for indexing.