

A Parent's Guide to "Reeling In the Media"

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by Sheri Boggs

Jan Foland is jazzed. The Salk Middle School teacher and founding member of the Northwest Regional Alliance for Responsible Television/Media had just heard about last week's report by the Republican staff members of the Senate Judiciary Committee on the link between violence in the media and outbreaks of youth violence. In addition to making a clear case for the screen-violence-leads-to-real-violence argument, the report, spearheaded by Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), makes practical recommendations for monitoring the content and presentation of the media in regard to children.

"This is incredible," says Foland from her South Hill home. "We've known about this connection for years, and now it's finally being taken seriously. We hear it, we see it, and after Columbine, we know it."

Of particular interest to Foland is the report's recommendation that the current rating system, which keeps separate codes for film, music and TV, should adopt a new set of universal codes that would apply to all media. "A universal rating system would take so much confusion out of the equation."

While concern over song lyrics and slasher films was at one time the pet project of conservative Republicans and senator's wives, the face of the movement to protect impressionable young minds is changing. Many liberals and Democrats - including First Lady Hillary Clinton, who spoke out last Thursday against television violence during a stop on her "Listening Tour" - now recognize that our media is saturated with violent images and our society is suffering.

"It's not just television - it's the video games, the music, the movies," says Don Higgins, director of Spokane's West Central Community Center and spokesperson for the Northwest Regional Alliance for Responsible Television/Media. "You have clear scientific evidence, in my estimation," he continues, "that these media are completely out of control, and the cost to society is horrendous. Yet they've completely absolved of any kind of accountability."

Higgins goes on to cite some chilling statistics: "I just read that the average emergency room bill to treat one gunshot wound totals about \$17,000, which then gets passed off to the taxpayers," he says. "But hundreds of millions of dollars are made in the first week that some of these really violent films are released, and yet there's no kind of system to help pay for some of the consequences."

But would putting reins on the media be censorship? Don't 99 percent of the kids consume pop culture without consequence? And won't controls on media lessen the choices available to adults? Foland isn't moved by such arguments. After all, she says, "we're not going to be able to stop it - we can slow it down, and we can be aware."

Higgins agrees: "The bottom line is that the media industry has such wealth and such power that it's going to be very difficult to control it through legislation. It's going to take more of a grassroots approach."

In his work in the West Central neighborhood, Higgins says he has seen first hand the effects of violence in the media - effects that received national attention with the release of the National Television Violence Study. Around the time of the report's release last year, the West Central neighborhood was dealing with the murder of a pizza delivery driver by a couple of teenage kids, news that it has the largest population of sex offenders in the city and a notable resurgence of gang activity.

"The study showed us that prolonged exposure to TV violence results in aggressive behavior," says Higgins, "and that repeated exposure also results in an exaggerated sense of apprehension and fear that one might become the victim of violent behavior. But the most shocking finding of this study was that violence is addictive - that with each taste of it, we crave more and more."

Higgins also explains that in addition to the narcotic effects of violence, its presence leaves no room to develop better coping skills. "The scariest thing is when you think of your first huge emotional experience, say a break-up or experimenting with drugs, and how it's during a crisis that years of programming come out." When people are pushed to a point of stress that's beyond their control, when they've been drinking or doing drugs, or are just plain overwrought, that's when you see people acting out the behaviors they see on television and in the movies.

If all of this seems much too daunting for the average family, take heart. There are currently some effective resources available for parents, as well as, the possibility of some very real change on the horizon. Higgins and other concerned citizens like Foland founded the Northwest Regional Alliance for Responsibility in Television/Media in answer to their own concerns about the effects of the media on children. As part of their work

in getting the message out, the group has brought in speakers from the front lines of the current media violence debate, and sought to educate local parents through a variety of programs in schools and community centers across town.

And it's no small irony that the Internet, one of the biggest sources of concern for parents, also houses some great websites designed to help parents preview potentially objectionable material before their kids get their hands on it.

One of the best sites is Screen It! which offers impressively detailed reviews of brand new movie and video releases. What makes this site so helpful is not just that it analyzes the movie for content, it tells you exactly what to expect and where it occurs in the film. Not only that, it's right on top of the new releases. For instance the site's review of *The Blair Witch Project* rates the film through 15 categories, including sex and nudity, blood and gore, disrespectful or bad attitude, profanity, violence, music (both scary and "inappropriate"), frightening scenes and alcohol/drug use. As if that's not complete enough, the site offers a well-written plot synopsis, a detailed essay concerning the film's merits and then actually explains what happens within those 15 categories. After reading the complete list, it's quite apparent that the volunteers of Screen It! have done their homework. For *The Blair Witch Project*, the reviewers counted 134 uses of the "F-word," noticed every time a character made an innocuous sexual comment and even listed the scary elements not seen on screen but picked up from the characters' dialogue.

"It's an amazing resource," says Foland, "because it gives you the information but lets you decide what to do with it. What might be appropriate for you might not be appropriate for me."

In addition to the websites designed to help parents choose materials and media experiences for their children, there are also a number of web-based services for instance NetNanny, CyberPatrol and SafeSurf, designed to block out objectionable material. But how effective are they? Like the much-ballyhooed V-Chip, it turns out that these services are not entirely kidproof.

"The kids are often a lot more technologically sophisticated than their parents," says Higgins, "and they can usually find the loopholes with a little bit of effort."

"The problem with the V-Chip," adds Foland, "is that a lot of people still aren't informed as to how it works, so they're not using it." (See "Understanding the V-Chip," page 11.)

One very simple, very workable solution comes from founder and vice chair of Telect, Judi Williams. "It's actually my son Wayne's idea," says Williams of her 35-year-old son and current CEO of Telect, "but it makes so much sense."

The solution applies mostly to pornographic websites, but could be adapted for other adult-only sites. "You know how websites are followed by different three-letter configurations, like .com, .net, .org, .edu," says Williams, "well, why not put .xxx after the porn sites? That would allow filters to block the site for kids, but it would still be available for adults who wish to visit the site."

Williams has written numerous letters to Congress as well as industry leaders like Bill Gates, and hopes that others will see the merit of such a solution.

"This puts the responsibility on the websites rather than on the people who are surfing. And it doesn't step on anyone's First Amendment rights."

But, Higgins says, it turns out that one of the most workable solutions boils down to good old-fashioned communication. Higgins maintains that perhaps the most important tool in a parent's arsenal is simple awareness. "Parents have to first understand the relationship of prolonged exposure that violent media has on their children's behavior."

Higgins also encourages families to find things to do other than watch television. "Families can read together, or play outside or learn a new board game," he says, "but something needs to be done. Violence in the media is a serious health problem for our youth; it's been documented by the American Medical Association. Action needs to be taken."

And perhaps one of the most hopeful signs lies within the kids themselves. "We can lecture kids all we want, but the bottom line is they don't know otherwise," says Foland. "To tell them they can't watch something is like trying to take a lollipop from a two-year old."

So what can concerned adults do? "Engage them," says Foland. "Show them the power of the media." As an example, Foland refers to a colleague's work with more than 100 kids who, at the beginning of the study, almost all claimed little to no media influence over their lives. "But as the experiment went on," Williams says, "they began to see how the media shapes almost everything in their lives, and by the end of the unit we got back 120

cards from the kids that not only admitted to a huge media influence, but many kids were inspired to walk away from TV and encourage their families to do so."