

'Town Forum to Address Television Link to Youth Violence'

West Central Community News - March 1999 Edition

By Don Higgins, Executive Director, West Central Community Center. Chairman, Northwest Alliance for Responsible Television and Media

A Town Hall meeting will be held in the Spokane Convention Center, March 20, 7-10 p.m. to address the issue of television violence and its effect on our youth. Author and researcher, Joanne Cantor, will address the findings of the National Television Violence Study. This study reports an alarming increase in youth violence which is directly related to television.

Children's fear and aggression linked to television. Network television violence increased by 12% since 1994.

Our children spend more time per week watching television than they do in school. Before finishing elementary school kids will have watched 8,000 murders. By age eighteen they will have seen over 200,000. Sixty seven percent of prime time network television contains violence. Ninety-two percent of premium cable shows contain violence. The result is that kids have become more aggressive, more fearful and more desensitized to violence. Kids act out their aggression more frequently, and in extreme cases, some kids acting out the behaviors that they learn from films and television, results in tragedy.

In spite of efforts by Congress to address this issue, the television industry (network and cable) has failed to adopt a comprehensive "parent friendly" code to assist families to monitor the content of television children watch. The study reports that one of the major results of the television industry's self-regulation has been a significant increase rather than a decrease in the amount and kind of violence that children are exposed to. Violence on network television has increased by 12 percent since 1994.

Youth imitate the violent behavior that they see on television.

This February, the Art and Entertainment Cable Channel surveyed, "Copy Cat Crimes" by youth. In each instance the crime was directly related to a movie that they had watched. Movies like, "Natural Born Killers," "Silence of the Lambs," "Scream," "The Money Train," "Taxi Driver," "In Cold Blood." Each depicted graphic, aggravated acts of violence. Each film was followed by youth acting out these scenes in real life. When several of these youth were interviewed in prison, an alarming number recounted how they had planned and executed the murders exactly as they had seen in these films.

Television is not the only factor in the increase in youth violence. Video games and the music industry are also a cause of great concern.

The lyrics of three songs in the top 20 rock-rap hits for 1998 include: Fantasies of murdering police, extreme domestic violence, and the gruesome butchering of parents. The murders of two police officers in Miami, Florida, have allegedly been linked to this music.

What do these conditions portend for the future of our children, for our families? Should there be greater regulation of these industries? How do you balance the First Amendment Right of Freedom of Expression, with the rights of parents and the welfare of our children? What are the limits of artistic expression and who bears the responsibility for the consequences?

It's a bottom line business, we just give them what they want.

According to film director, John McLaughlen, "It is the job of the artist to push the boundary (of artistic expression)." This is evidenced in the popularity among youth of programs like "The Jerry Springer Show." This is expression, but is it art? Where is its community value in films like, "Natural Born Killers."

Film producer, Julia Phillips, diminishes the culpability of the film makers for their product. She contends, "It is a bottom line business We just make the movies; we don't sell the guns It is the audiences fault they gobble this stuff up." Is the industry just giving the market what they want or does the industry drive the market?

The youth market is an especially attractive and vulnerable segment of this market. Are they mature enough consumers to make responsible judgments about the products that are targeted at them? Do they understand the consequences of this "art?"

What is the price of television violence?

Who bares the responsibility for the victims of this violence? Is it the youthful offender, the parents, the industry or society in general? Who bares the costs of this violence? How many millions of additional tax dollars have we

spent for more police, the public defenders, the courts, the jails, and the probation officers? How do you measure the cost of the broken hearts of families who mourn the loss of loved ones, the victims of this violence? How are these costs measured against the hundreds of millions of dollars of profit reaped annually by these industries? Where is the balance?

The National Television Violence Study has been produced by the National Cable Television Association. The supervision council for this study is made up of representatives from the fields of medicine, psychiatry law, education, and the film and television industry.