Safeguarding our Youth:
Violence Prevention for our Nation's Children

The working group on media met in three break-out sessions over two days to consider issues related to mass media and our growing culture of violence. This was hardly time to exhaust the many complex and interrelated aspects of the current situation. Nevertheless, several key concepts emerged to help define the issues involved along with a number of recommendations for new directions that might lead to resolution.

Moderator: William Modzelewski, Director, Drug Planning/Outreach, Dept. of Education
Reporter: Elizabeth Thoman, Exec. Director, Center for Media and Values, Los Angeles

Key Concepts:

1. **The issue of media and violence is much broader than television.**

   ▪ There's also cable, movies, video games, advertising, music and popular culture.

   ▪ Important to recognize that news is different from entertainment media. Violence in the reporting of current events, although it too can be portrayed gratuitously, may have more justification than violence for entertainment.

2. **Mass media may be accused of causing an increase of violence in society, but they are not the [only] cause.**

   ▪ Many factors are involved in creating our current culture of violence-- circular poverty, decay of the inner city, breakdown of family life, lack of education and jobs, addiction to drugs, loss of purpose and self-esteem, etc.-- along with, of course, the ready availability of guns. A further influence is an attitude of militarism, domination of the weak and competition to win at all costs-- which may be, in turn, portrayed by the media, making them appear normative and acceptable to society;

   ▪ This is not to excuse the media industry from accepting a share of the responsibility for the current situation. Continuing to deny *any* responsibility is unacceptable and even, unconscionable.

   ▪ It is important to distinguish, from research, the multiple and various effects of mediated violence. Most people focus their attention primarily on whether media violence "causes" some people to later commit violent acts, but the literature suggests there are at least four social effects that need to be considered:

   a. *Increased aggression and meanness--* that is, correlation between seeing mediated violence and being

more violent now or in the future. May or may not involve influencing a person to commit criminal acts; the effect may also be a bullying attitude, hostility or mean-spiritedness toward others or society as a whole.

b. *Victim effect*-- the increase in fear and concern for self-protection: locks and security gates, fear of going out alone or at night. Result: staying home where we watch ever-increasing ratios of violent entertainment thus perpetuating the paranoia. Gerbner's "mean world syndrome."

c. *Bystander effect*-- increased callousness and insensitivity to those around us who may be hurting. Decline of "community" and being a "Good Samaritan" to others in need.

d. *Increased appetite for violence*-- the more violence one sees, the more "jolts per minute" needed to keep viewers involved and watching. Media violence can be addictive.

3. **All young people don't view mediated violence as influential.**

- Many see poverty, joblessness, drugs, gangs or parental neglect as more influential on a lifestyle of violence or crime.

- Research indicates that adults and children don't see the same TV-- what is offensive or influential to one person of a specific age, gender, ethnic or class background may not be similarly offensive or influential to another.

- It is also true that media are so pervasive in our lives that few are aware of the impact of media at all-- positive or negative. Particularly in regard to television, Americans have generally bought the myth of media as mindless entertainment without much significance or consequence. Today's young people have not known a time when there was not television so they can hardly separate themselves from the image culture in which they are growing up.

4. **The civic community has a lot to learn about how to work with local media and how to use media formats to introduce or reinforce positive social messages.**

- There has been a sense of powerlessness about media and technology so media have not been used by community groups to set a community's social agenda; media set the agenda, in part, by portraying the negative rather than covering the positive.

- If media are part of the problem in creating our current culture of violence, they must be challenged to be part of the solution. We have not done enough to move beyond blame to involve local and national media leaders in creating "win-win" solutions.

Directions & Recommendations

1. **The mood in America is changing.**

- An increasing number of American citizens no longer believe the myth of media as mindless entertainment. Particularly parents of young children see the enormous influence of media to convey to their children positive as well as negative behaviors and attitudes. This groundswell cannot be ignored. The challenge is to direct it to positive action rather than extremist reaction.

- The issue of media violence is really just the first phase of a major cultural debate about life in the 21st century. What kind of people do we want our children to become? What kind of culture will best give them the environment they will need to grow up healthy and whole?

- We all have to examine our personal responsibility for contributing to the increase in media violence.

Violence *does* attract an audience.

- In the face of rising violence creating a clear public health crisis, First Amendment arguments no longer seem unassailable-- and yet few are comfortable with any form of censorship. A new concept is to find regulatory standards that are "First Amendment friendly."

- We *can* change the direction of media by a combination of audience education and effective organizing techniques. Such change will not happen quickly, however. We must be patient and have a long-term vision and multi-year strategies.

2. **Need to support a major public "movement" to challenge the corporate media of America to act more responsibly as good citizens in an increasingly mediated society.**

- Take lessons from the environmental movement to form a "cultural environmental" movement. Hold media accountable for being an educator as well as a business and an entertainer.

- Good solutions will not micro-manage the media industry. They will focus rather on a *vision* of what mass media can do to unify society rather than tear it apart. Reclaim concept of media as a public service rather than just a private investment; long term impact, not just short term thinking.

- Rather than using negative energy, e.g. boycotts, be pro-active, e.g. establish a Council of Excellence to reward corporations/advertisers who resist sponsoring violence, who "do the right thing."

- Make it easy for citizens to express their views-- "800" numbers, bilingual access

- This is increasingly important as we face a technological future with 500 cable channels, interactive programming and "electronic superhighways." Who will set policies?

3. **Community groups/agencies need to become more effective in using communications media and working with local media institutions to create the safe, caring communities we all envision and desire.**

- Though community institutions should not have to "kick down the door" to access print or electronic media outlets, it may be necessary at times.

- Collaboration will be more effective if community leaders are well informed and understand the organizational structure and business needs of commercial vs. public media systems.

- Mediated activities can complement and extend the impact of interpersonal programs, e.g. late night radio music/talk show to supplement gang intervention or violence reduction programs; videos for parenting education, computer networks, electronic forums, etc.

- Local and national media could play a major role in educating the public about violence as a public health issue.

4. **Broad-based media literacy education needs to become a priority in the U.S. and implemented in an interagency, interdisciplinary approach.**

- Media literacy education is a growing movement in the U.S. but is still many years behind most other countries, especially Canada.

- Effective media literacy education involves four interrelated aspects:

    a. *critical thinking*-- learning to uncover the explicit and implicit meanings of a media message, whether verbal, visual or aural.

    b. *critical analysis*-- "making the connections" between what's in the media and its significance to one's daily life; identifying economic influences as well as political ideologies and values, such as racism or sexism.

    c. *creative production skills*-- learning to produce a media message, to express oneself in various media forms from print to multi-media; creating alternative points of view to mainstream media.

    d. *preparation for "citizenship" in a media culture*-- understanding the economic and political structures and how mass media "works" in society; learning to take personal or public action to influence the use or challenge the abuse of media in society: from sending a postcard to the F.C.C. to teaching youngsters to decode alcohol or tobacco advertising to organizing a public access cable show.

- At the community level, organize media literacy not just in school classrooms but perhaps more effectively in afterschool programs for kids or parenting programs for adults. Involve churches, clubs, social workers, health care, youth and family serving agencies. All helping professions can make a "media connection."

- On the federal level, involve Departments of Education as well as Health and Human Services, the F.C.C., the F. T. C. and others in interagency investment in research and development of comprehensive as well as specifically targeted media literacy programs.

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