

Toronto Star, **One bill too many**, an op-ed perspective [793 words]

Media violence is again in the news. On January 18, you reported (*Too graphic for kids?*) the press conference held by Professor Peter Jaffe and others on the subject of media violence. At the same time, Antonia Zerbisias provided her perspective on the issue (*What you can restrict: children*). And this week, Mr. Bernard Bigras' Private Member's Bill C-327 (An Act to amend the Broadcasting Act (reduction of violence in television broadcasts)) is scheduled for debate in the House of Commons.

The issue of violence in the media is not new. Nor is M.P. Bigras' bill, which was first introduced in the House in 2000. It was not necessary then. It is less necessary seven years on. Nor are the coalition's arguments helpful to the bill's passage. They seem unaware of the accomplishments of the last 15 years, at least in the television area.

When 13-year old Virginie Larivière deposited her petition with Prime Minister Mulroney in November 1992, television was the issue, but it is 2007, and the world has changed. First, even the coalition acknowledged that technology has resulted in the greatly increased role of video games, DVDs and music lyrics as platforms for violent content. Indeed, I would argue that these may have supplanted, even overwhelmed, television as the primary source of media violence. Second, and much more important, Canada's private broadcasters have long since taken charge of the issue of violence on television.

Their first big step was the introduction of the Canadian Association of Broadcasters Violence Code way back in 1993. In that code, the broadcasters provided solutions.

The first of these was the Watershed. Broadcasters do not air programs that include any violence intended for adult audiences before 9:00 pm or after 6:00 am. Even though the Broadcasting Act requires the provision of programming for a wide variety of tastes and interests, broadcasters view that early part of the day as a comfortable haven, free from adult-themed programming, for Canadian families.

In addition, there is no gratuitous or glamorized violence on television at any time of the day or night. Period.

The tragedy at Montreal's École Polytechnique in 1989 helped to ensure that private broadcasters would prohibit both abusive comment and any programming that sanctions, promotes or glamorizes any aspect of violence against women. They also extend that protection to other identifiable groups.

There are special rules dealing with children's programming. There is not a more thorough set of rules in any country. Very little violence, whether physical, verbal or emotional can be included. Animated children's programming cannot have violence as its central theme or even suggest that violence is the preferred way to resolve disputes. It cannot encourage dangerous imitation. Nor can it even include themes that threaten a child's sense of security. Even frightening or otherwise excessive special effects not required by the storyline are prohibited. And so on.

Even as the terrible tales recounted at the Pickton trial stress society, there are cautions in the code relating to the content of news and public affairs programming. While assuring that, in this democracy, the presentation of the news ought not to be sanitized to hide the reality of the human condition, broadcasters must be cautious in the use of violent or disturbing footage, taking into account the age of likely viewers at earlier times of day.

Broadcasters actively help audiences make informed viewing choices. Ratings icons run every hour and advisories telling viewers in plain language what's coming are broadcast at the start of dramatic programs and following every commercial break.

And, finally, in the event that any one of the foregoing rules is breached, the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council is there to deal with it. The disappearance of the *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers* a decade ago is ample evidence of that. Moreover, the percentage of complaints about violence on television made by the public, which is a fair barometer of their concerns, has dropped steadily, in fact by 37% between 2001 and 2006.

Moreover, as Antonia Zerbisias pointed out, there is an immense role to be played by parents, who are the content gatekeepers in their homes. Nor is violence the only issue for them. What is or is not appropriate for any given family must be determined by those who guide familial values. And television set manufacturers and cable/satellite digital boxes provide the V-chip and other technical blocking devices to cut out signals that parents consider inappropriate for their homes.

In any event, whatever the other media (in the music, video games and film areas) have or have not been doing, your readers should be aware of the fact that Canada's private broadcasters and the Canadian Broadcast Standards Council have been front and centre in effectively controlling this issue for years.

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