
Independent Audits and Self-Regulation -Not Legislation- Is Best Answer to TV Violence

Senator Paul Simon *

The sharp focus on television violence in the last two years has brought some fledgling improvements that offer the best hope ever for sustained progress in curbing glamorized violence on television.

The television industry has adopted an advance parental advisory system, the first ever joint standards on violence by the broadcast networks, formal and informal discussions and working groups in the creative community, and, most significantly, systems developed by both the cable and broadcast networks for annual independent audits of television violence.

The industry's response to public and congressional concern about media violence-a dramatic departure from its response just a decade ago-offers the best hope ever for sustained progress in curbing glamorized violence without government censorship.

Though I've worked a great deal on issues affecting children, mostly in education policy, my entry in the television violence debate happened mostly by accident. Ten years ago, while traveling across Illinois, I checked into my hotel room one night in LaSalle County. I switched on the TV and there, in living color, a movie was showing someone being ripped in half by a chain saw. That scene disturbed me that night. If it could have that effect on an adult, I wondered to myself, what would it do to a seven-year-old or a ten-year-old?

The next day I asked my staff to find out what researchers have concluded about the effects of television violence on children. I learned that concerns about television violence had been around almost as long as television itself. This concern had spawned a wealth of research into the effects of television violence on children and its contribution to the violence in society. The studies were clear: Television violence contributes to violence in our society.

Appraisals such as the 1972 Surgeon General's report, the 1982 National Institute of Mental Health's ten-year review of the literature, and the 1984 Attorney General's Task Force on Family and Violence report helped document a correlation between television violence and violence in our society. In fact, the 1982 assessment concluded that the findings reached by the 1972 report were only strengthened by the findings of the more recent studies, observing that, "In magnitude, television violence is as strongly correlated with aggressive behavior as any other behavioral variable which has been measured."

Frankly, the studies serve to bolster what is to many of us plain common sense. Children imitate what they see and hear. That is how they learn. I can see this with my four-year-old granddaughter. Violence on television is absorbed and imitated-particularly by children-into our lives and into our culture. One estimate found that by the time youngsters graduate from high school, many of them will have watched television for 22,000 hours, compared to only half that number for hours spent in school. By age eighteen, young people will have been exposed to as many as 18,000 televised murders and 800 suicides, according to a 1992 study by Fred Hechinger of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development. The evidence is overwhelming that the impact of being bombarded with violent images ranges from an overall desensitization, to consequent acceptance of violence, to increasingly violent behavior.

No one suggests that television violence is the sole cause of violence and crime in our society. We have, as a society and a government, largely ducked the problem of handgun proliferation and we concentrate the poor into our central cities and then ignore their problems. But one of the contributing factors is violence on the entertainment screen. And just as thirty seconds of the attractive portrayal of a bar of soap sells soap, and thirty seconds of the attractive portrayal of a car sells that car, twenty-five minutes of the attractive portrayal of violence sells violence. Television, like political leaders, can appeal to the best in each of us or to our worst impulses and weaknesses.

As Howard Stringer of CBS frankly observed:

If you argue that we [the entertainment industry] have no moral responsibility to sustain values, then perhaps we have an artistic responsibility. Death stings, pain hurts, loss devastates, fear terrifies. If we still insist that television merely mirrors reality, then let us reflect our reality more skillfully and honestly. Murder, even fighting, is not poetic or balletic. It is ugly and clumsy. Violence is vile.

No one suggests that there should be no violence on television. A film on the Civil War or on the Holocaust is likely to have violence, but I would not suggest that those shows not be aired, though sensitivity to timing is important. There should, however, be less violence on the screen, and, more important, it should not be glamorized. When we watch a news program from Bosnia showing the tragedy of violence, we understand the pain, the anguish, and the senselessness of violence.

It has been a long struggle to gather leaders of the entertainment industry to a consensus on this matter. In 1986, I asked representatives from the television industry to voluntarily establish standards on violence. They told me they could not do that-work together as an industry-because of antitrust laws.

To eliminate this antitrust claim as a reason for inaction, I introduced legislation in 1986 to grant a three-year antitrust exemption to allow joint action on TV violence. Representative Dan Glickman (D-Kan.) introduced the companion measure in the House of Representatives. There was much resistance to even this relatively innocuous measure. The industry and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) spent almost four years bottling it up in the House. Finally, in 1990, Congress passed the Television Violence Act, and President Bush signed it into law on December 1, 1990.

With the antitrust issue-or excuse-resolved, the industry still balked at taking action. Midway through the three-year antitrust exemption, the industry had taken no meaningful steps to regulate itself. At that point, I began calling public attention to the fact that this window of opportunity for self-regulation was beginning to close. On December 11, 1992, the broadcast networks adopted joint standards that they had developed for the depiction of violence in television programs. These standards signified the first substantial use of the Television Violence Act and were first used beginning with the 1993-94 television season.

In May and June of 1993, I held two hearings on television violence. These hearings showcased the overwhelming evidence on television violence and gave the leaders of the industry a chance to discuss their views and intentions on reducing violence on television.

At the hearings, concerns were raised about the First Amendment implications of any legislation on this issue. As Chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on the Constitution, as a former journalist, and as a "card-carrying" member of the ACLU, I've always been sensitive to these concerns. I have always strongly favored industry self-regulation over any congressional action, because no matter how carefully constructed, legislation to deal with television violence risks constitutional infringements. Nonetheless, I warned the industry that sentiment in public opinion and in the Congress meant that if more progress wasn't made, there might well be an effort to pass legislation.

After the hearings, as more and more members of Congress and the public began to call for change, in June of 1993, the industry announced a new parental advisory policy. This advisory would precede any violent shows to assist parents in screening their children's television viewing. There is nothing wrong with parental advisories, but they alone are not the answer. Too many children do not have parental supervision. I was looking for an overall reduction in the level of violence on television.

In August of 1993, I addressed the first-ever industry-wide conference on television violence in Los Angeles. In that address, I called for the creative community to accept responsibility and to police itself. Although there had been significant strides by then in addressing this problem, I urged a lasting commitment to sustain this effort. I called for independent monitoring for both the broadcast and cable networks. This monitoring would examine and assess the levels of television violence and make annual reports to the public.

After much negotiation and hard work, in January of 1994, the industry leaders announced their decision to implement

monitoring systems. That spring, they announced their picks for independent monitors. In May, the cable networks selected MediaScope, a nonprofit foundation that specializes in television issues, to head their new monitoring program, which will involve four universities and several noted researchers. In June, the broadcast networks, after their own extensive search, tapped the UCLA Center for Communications Policy, headed by Jeffrey Cole, to oversee their effort.

Independent monitoring should keep us from slipping back into old patterns. It's a way to clarify understanding of this issue, to pinpoint responsibility, and to give the industry itself both a baseline and a feedback loop for continuing improvement.

We're turning a corner in our culture. Ten years ago when this effort began, few believed we would ever reach this point. All along, cynics have claimed that societal attitudes are not easily changed and these efforts would bear no fruit. But societal attitudes do change. Cigarette smoking was the norm not long ago. Just watch the movie *Laura* and it's easy to see how pervasive smoking was in our society. Today we don't see many movies where people are chainsmoking, and the reality is today fewer and fewer people smoke. The progress is unprecedented.

A review of the networks' fall schedules show that progress in the reduction of television violence is already being made. The networks' new independent assessment processes are a promising and unprecedented experiment that deserve a chance to achieve progress on an equally challenging issue, the glamorization of violence. I believe the networks, as well as the industry at-large and the viewing public, will give it a chance to work.

*The Author (D-III.) has led congressional scrutiny of TV violence since 1985. All quotes and sources cited in this Essay are on file with the Author. [Return to text](#)