

## Media and Entertainment: Civic Responsibility - 1995

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It is to the praise of the righteous that... they... concern themselves with the needs of the community. (Sifre Numbers, Pinehas #138, f.52a [H. p. 184])

### Issue

The increase in editorialization of news articles, focus by the press and other forms of journalism on sensational stories, communications industry mergers, violence, violence against women in particular and gratuitous sex in the various entertainment media have raised serious concerns about their influence on society and particularly on young people.

### Background

Trivialization, at the least, and degradation of the human spirit, at the worst, characterize too much of the journalism and entertainment produced in North America. News is, more often than not, editorialized. Respected, venerable papers, in the interests of liveliness, readability and expanding readership, freely use adjectives, adverbs and headlines that give news articles a “spin.” Newspapers give front-page coverage to violent and sensational events, often burying important information in the interior of the paper.

The WRJ resolution Responsibility of the Media (1985, p. C-17) urged that “newsclips and commentary ensure integrity, objectivity and appropriateness,” even in crisis situations. Issues addressed include the transmission of unverified information and conjecture. This remains a serious problem as seen in the false, inflammatory attribution of the Oklahoma Federal Building bombing to Middle-Eastern terrorists.

Bill Kovach of Harvard University wrote in a New York Times op-ed piece (8/3/95): For the past decade and a half, journalism has been... squeezed into a smaller and smaller corner of the... communications industry. The values and norms of journalism have been steadily eroded as corporate managers order news divisions to produce more “info-tainment” programs.

Potential exacerbation of this trend is suggested by recent mergers in the communications industry, e.g., that of a major network with a producer of entertainment programs and films. Ready availability of entertainment programs could set up a competition to the detriment of the broadcast news department and other public affairs coverage. TV news gives priority to violence, with shorter, misleading “sound bites” to important but less sensational news.

Americans “blame television more than any other single factor for teen-age sex and violence” (The New York Times, 8/20/95). Children and TV, WRJ’s 1975 resolution, addressed several issues of concern, pointing to the “deluge of crime and brutality in entertainment readily available to children.” The TV industry broadcasts increasingly violent, brutal and gratuitously sexual images. Although media executives argue that causative relationships between violence on TV and anti-social behavior have not been demonstrated, they act on the basis of such relationships, seeking to convince advertisers that TV ads will improve their sales. Advertising in itself is of concern because of its frequent sexually explicit content.

The entertainment industries produce films, videos, computer games and musical recordings that provide a diet of violence and explicit sex. Films are targeted towards the largest audience, young males between 18 and 25

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years, an audience which likes action—violent action. Computer on-line systems comprise an area of emerging concern regarding children’s access to violent and sexual electronic mail messages and “chat” rooms.

Recent developments signal societal attention to media violence: the U.S. Congress has passed legislation, endorsed by President Clinton, requiring all new television sets to carry V-chips to enable parents to block programs or channels they find offensive. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences will hold a symposium on violence in early 1996.

“Gangsta rap,” a particularly heinous form of rap music, uses racist, pornographic and brutal language and images. Described by Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie as “filthy and vile,” gangsta rap glorifies violence and the “savaging of women,” especially African-American women (“An Open Letter to the Music Industry,” in Reform Judaism, New York: UAHF. Fall 1994, p. 88). Sales are made primarily to young people, a significant number of whom are children between 10 and 14 years of age. African-American ministers and other leaders are organizing coalitions to stop the proliferation of gangsta rap. Activists have prompted a corporate promise to generate industry-wide standards for rap lyrics. Senator Bill Bradley has urged a civic rebellion in which people would make their feelings about entertainment they find offensive known to the producers, sponsors and wider community.

### **Resolution**

The Women of Reform Judaism, reaffirming the resolutions adopted in 1975 on Children and TV and in 1985 on Responsibility of the Media, and mindful of concern about the accuracy, balance and objectivity of news reportage and aspects of popular culture, calls upon its affiliates to:

- 1) Inform sisterhood and congregational members about issues of press coverage, including specific incidents of unverified, inflammatory or biased reporting, and urge Sisterhood members to inform the press of their concerns.
- 2) Provide congregational families with sufficient information, including explanations for use of technology such as the V-chip, to help parents supervise children’s viewing activity.
- 3) Organize an advocacy campaign in the sisterhood and congregation and join with community coalitions to convey their distress with entertainment media to the highest corporate levels and the community.
- 4) Applaud media efforts to develop industry-wide standards and urge them to continue and expand such efforts.
- 5) Monitor and support legislative and judicial measures regarding violence and pornography on TV and in other entertainment media viewed or heard by children to be sure that such measures do not infringe upon constitutional or human rights.
- 6) Urge all on-line systems to set standards for communication, as some already do, or to provide parents with the means to limit their children’s access to areas they consider appropriate.