

PROTECTING CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

It is widely accepted that young children and adolescents are more vulnerable to suffering adverse effects from the portrayal of violence through the electronic media. Moreover, research evidence shows that those of them who have more aggressive tendencies will also be more attracted to watching violent material.³² This tendency can sometimes be exacerbated by a difficult home life (or no home at all) and growing up in an environment where conflict is always resolved through aggressive means. There are also those who suffer from depression and mental illness.

There was widespread agreement among those who forwarded submissions that young children and adolescents must be protected from the possible adverse effects of violent images. Opinions differed however about the best ways to go about this and about who should be responsible for ensuring that adequate protection is achieved. On the one hand, there are those who believe that material for viewing and playing should be censored by the parent, teacher or other responsible adult, at the point of entry into the home or school. Others believe that, since parents do not have as much time on their hands as children to spend on electronic media entertainment, and since some parents do not recognise their responsibilities in this area, other forms of control are necessary. These could include prescribing a late night time slot for some television programs and refusing classification to others on the ground of too much graphic violence.

The Senate Committee was told that even for those parents who wish to exercise their responsibilities seriously, the lack of detailed information on how movies and games are classified poses difficulties. Another argument put forward was that television stations in particular advertise material containing violence that some parents do not wish their children to see during times that are billed as children's viewing times. This is apparently done during the *News* and *Current Affairs* segment (which taken together last for more than one hour on all

32 Brown, M. *The Portrayal of Violence in the Media: Impacts & Implications for Policy, Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* No 55, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, June 1996.

television stations) and which are exempt from the G classification that otherwise applies at that time of the early evening.

Classification Issues

Section 122 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* requires the Australian Broadcasting Authority to develop standards for children's programming. The Authority assesses children's programs for classification. It also assesses commercial television licensees' compliance with children's television standards. However, the ABA does not classify the majority of children's programs imported from overseas (Australian made "specials" for children are submitted to the ABA for classification). The television stations are responsible for the classification of those programs, in accordance with the FACTS Code of Practice.

A major concern in the children's program category involves the G classification given to so-called "toy-cartoons". The Australian Psychological Society told the Committee that such cartoons often have the highest levels of violence and that:

There is evidence that even the 'unrealistic' violence displayed in such cartoons can affect young children's behaviour (Sanson & di Muccio, 1993; Silvern & Williamson, 1987)...Evidence suggests that the effects of viewing such cartoons and then playing with the associated toys has marked effects on subsequent aggressive behaviour. From a theoretical perspective, this finding suggests that the toys act as retrieval cues for the aggressive scripts encoded during viewing of the cartoon. The calling up and expression of the script through play with the toys then further establishes its prominence in the child's mind.³³

The Committee recognises the concerns expressed by numerous experts working with children about this important component of children's television. Cartoons generally came in for criticism because of the violence they portrayed. Submissions repeatedly referred to *The Ferals*, *The Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, as being unsuitable for the age group at which they are aimed. In its response to the Hansard transcript of the Committee's public seminar, FACTS explained that its Code of Practice

33 Submission No 173 (Australian Psychological Society)

allowed "more latitude" in the classification of cartoon characters than "characters which closely resemble people". But it recognised that this remains a "vexed issue".³⁴

The Committee recommends:

That the Australian Broadcasting Authority be made responsible for the classification of all children's programs (including cartoons for children).
(Recommendation 5)

The Committee is aware that all commercial television stations have intensified their on-air campaigns in recent months, about the television classification system. While the Committee welcomes this, it feels that as well as advertising that classification and consumer advice is given by the station in printed programs and at the start of each broadcast, the advertising campaign should include *information about the meaning of each classification*. At the moment, viewers are told that films are rated PG, M or MA but no information is given about what the symbols mean.

The Committee recommends:

That the current on-air information campaign by the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) be modified so that, in addition to telling viewers that classification and consumer advice is available, information should be given about the meaning of each classification symbol.
(Recommendation 6)

Desensitisation

The difficulties faced by members of the Classification Board in making decisions about classifications was recognised at the public seminar and mentioned in submissions. There was concern however, that repeated exposure to violent material leads to the desensitisation of members of the Classification Board so that they no longer respond in the way most other members of the community would (resulting in lower

34 Letter to Committee Chairman from Mr Tony Branigan, General Manager of FACTS, 28 January 1997.

classification levels than the community expects). As a result of research presented to it over the years, the Committee had been aware for some time that this could become a problem. It had made recommendations in a number of its previous reports, including the latest to be tabled in October 1996, that a committee drawn from representatives of a wide cross section of the community (a community committee) be established to review certain decisions of the Classification Board.

The Committee of Ministers on the Portrayal of Violence also recommended broader community representation on the Classification Board and the Classification Review Board. On 27 December 1996, the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, the Hon. Daryl Williams, announced that he had recommended to State and Territory Censorship Ministers that Community Assessment Panels be established to examine decisions of the Classification Board before the release of a film. He also announced that his department would review the process for selecting Classification Board members.³⁵ The Senate Committee welcomes the Minister's decision.

Classification of videos

Violent material shown on television came in for stronger criticism than material shown at cinema venues because of the tendency of children to accept or closely identify with everything that is available within the security of their home. When people go to the cinema, the physical distance may help them establish a distance between themselves and the action on screen. It may be more difficult, especially for children, to achieve this when watching television or videos in the comfort zone of their own home. Violent videos were seen as having a greater potential to exert an adverse influence on children, adolescents and disturbed adults because they are not only available in the home but the video can be replayed over and over again so that the viewer experiences a concentration of violence.³⁶

For this reason the Committee has always believed that videos should be classified more strictly than film for cinema release because young

35 The Hon. Daryl Williams, AM QC MP, Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Press release, 27 December 1996.

36 Submissions Nos 155, 270, 333

children at home are often unintentionally exposed to videos. The Committee reiterates the recommendation made in its last report:

That separate guidelines be introduced for the classification of videotapes to ensure that higher standards are applied to videotapes than for the equivalent categories of film for cinema release.

(Recommendation 7)

Classification by Television Stations

Films are classified by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) according to published Guidelines (the latest revised Guidelines were gazetted in September 1996). However, the majority of films are "modified" for television screening. This is especially necessary if the television station wishes (as is usually the case) to begin to screen the movie at 8.30 pm rather than at 9.00pm which would become necessary if the movie is rated MA or 9.30 pm (for MAV-rated movies). Unacceptable images and language are "edited out" so that the movie will fit into M-rated classification and be able to be shown at the 8.30 pm time-slot. The editing and classification process is carried out by "in-house" classification officers at the television station according to the guidelines stated in the various codes of practice. Young Media Australia deplored the fact that, at the TV stations:

Those responsible for classification work in isolation and with significant commercial pressures. The commercial TV classifiers mostly individually decide what classification should be applied. There also is no appeal system for commercial TV program classifications, in contrast to the comprehensive appeal process for other media.³⁷

In a letter to the Committee's Chairman, FACTS challenged the assertion from Young Media Australia that "classifiers" work in isolation:

The commercial television industry goes to some lengths to encourage station classification officers to meet with their counterparts at the ABC, SBS and the OFLC to discuss classification issues. Outside those meetings, there is quite a deal of informal

37 Submissions No 333

contact, and all commercial classification officers make extensive use of OFLC classification reasons in reaching decisions.³⁸

It is the Committee's view that all television stations (FACTS, the ABC and SBS) must accept responsibility for achieving greater consistency in the classification of the movies and other programs they show. The Committee believes that such consistency will be made possible if there was an opportunity for the ABA to review decisions made about the classification of films shown on television and if adequate feedback was available to classification officers.

The Committee recommends:

(a) That the Australian Broadcasting Authority, in association with the Office of Film and Literature Classification undertake at different times throughout the year a random audit of films and other programs classified for television by the television stations themselves and require the television stations to state:

(i) how much footage they have cut in the process of modifying the film for TV broadcast

(ii) their reasons for the classification they chose to give to the film under review.

and

(b) That the Australian Broadcasting Authority report on its findings in its annual report. (Recommendation 8)

In the Committee's view, parents would find it easier to limit the amount of violent images to which their children are exposed if television stations classifiers gave consumers more precise advice. For example, the symbol V could be used to label violent material. Different number of Vs would indicate the frequency and intensity of violence in a movie: V- for low level violence, VV for medium level violence and VVV for high level violence.

The Committee recommends:

38 Letter to Committee Chairman from Mr Tony Branigan, General Manager of FACTS, 28 January 1997.

That television stations vary the use of the symbol V to indicate the level of violence in a film ranging from V-low level violence to VV-medium level violence and VVV- to indicate high level violence.

(Recommendation 9)

The Committee wishes to make it clear that adoption of an additional classification for violent depictions would not exempt television stations from complying with section 123 (3B) of the *Broadcasting Services Act* 1992 which requires industry groups representing commercial television broadcasting licensees and community television broadcasting licensees to develop codes of practice which ensure that films classified "M" or "MA" do not portray material that goes beyond the previous "AO" classification criteria.

Violence on Videos

The protection of children from possible adverse effects of violent images in the electronic media is an area where a great degree of consensus is found. More controversial however, is the issue of how to minimise the possible adverse effect of violent portrayals on those adults who are prone to violent behaviour. As mentioned earlier, many who fall in the "aggressive personality" category tend to enjoy watching violent material repeatedly with occasionally disastrous results. Police regularly report finding large numbers of violent videos in the home of those charged with assault and other similar and more serious offences.

The video industry caters to over 5 million Australian homes where a video player and recorder is owned. The Senate Committee is aware that the majority of videos offer non-violent entertainment. However, violent videos become a problem when they are misused. The majority of submissions called for stricter classification to be set for violence (including Refused Classification -RC- for high level violence) portrayed on videos to reduce the possibility of their being available to already aggressive people or those prone to violent action. The Senate Committee welcomes the decision taken in July 1996 (following the recommendation of the Ministerial Committee) by the Attorney General and the State and Territory Censorship Ministers to amend the

classification guidelines for films and video to remove high level violence material from the R classification.

The Committee recommends:

That the Attorney General increase the level of fees imposed by the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) for the classification of material found to contain high level violence.

(Recommendation 10)

and

That the funds raised by the increased fees be used to finance public education campaigns aimed at highlighting the possible adverse effects of watching large amounts of violent material.

(Recommendation 11)

The Committee recommends also

That State and Territory Ministers consider proposals to require that all R-rated violent videos carry a label indicating that the content of such videos might be harmful to the mental wellbeing of children and those adults suffering from depression and other mental disorders.

(Recommendation 12)

When it comes to children, it is widely accepted that it is up to parents to exercise control on their children's viewing habits. At present, however, it appears to be relatively easy for children to obtain through rental outlets videos that cause concern to parents. Some rental outlets are more rigorous than others and ask for identification before allowing anyone under 18 years of age to borrow their R-rated videos but the majority do not question potential young customers.

The Australian Visual Software Distributors Association (AVSDA) suggested to the Committee of Ministers that a "video chip" could be introduced to allow parents and carers to limit the type of material that a child could borrow using their card. This would operate concurrently with a an Industry Code of Practice for Video and Interactive Software Retailers who would make a commitment to comply with the code. That

suggestion has been adopted by the Committee of Ministers and is one of their recommendations.

The Senate Committee believes that every effort should be made to make the classification system and the accompanying consumer advice from the OFLC as simple possible. Under the present system, the advice: "Medium level Violence" on a video cassette can have **four** different meanings, according to whether the advice accompanies a movie rated PG, M, MA or R. "Medium level Violence" in a PG- rated movie is very different in intensity and frequency to "Medium level Violence in a M-rated or MA- rated context. The Committee's view is that the current system is confusing for many parents and makes it difficult for them to guide their children.

The Committee recognises that classification decisions involve making fine judgements about the impact particular images may have on potential viewers. Each individual reacts differently, so that a depiction of violence that may be considered by the classifiers as not having "a high impact" and is classified M may in fact have a high impact on a 15 year old. It would be useful to potential borrowers and to parents in particular if both the frequency and intensity of violence in a video was highlighted. If the advice received was consistent across all classifications, a parent would be in a position to make a more accurate judgement of what an adolescent should be permitted to watch and there would be greater public confidence in the classification system.

News and Current Affairs programs

Submissions revealed a high degree of concern about the often violent content of television *News* and *Current Affairs* programs. This is borne out by the findings of the ABA's recent audience surveys. In surveys conducted in both 1995 and 1994, the content of news and current affairs concerned more people than any other aspect. The next major concern was violence and aggression. The ABA's 1994 survey of children's attitudes to television found that 45 per cent of parents in the survey nominated portrayals of real life as the top issue to cause children to become most upset when viewing. This was followed by 40 per cent nominating images of violence as being the most upsetting for their children. (48 per cent of parents claimed to place restrictions on programs depicting too much violence) The children also placed real depictions and "total violence" at the top of their list of what was most likely to upset them.³⁹

All television stations Codes of Practice have clear guidelines on how to deal with this sensitive issue. The Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS) Code of Practice for example states:

Where news, current affairs, or other programs not classified "M" or "MA" include for public interest reasons, material which is, in the licensee's opinion, likely to seriously distress or offend a substantial number of viewers, the licensee must provide adequate prior warning to viewers. The warning must precede the relevant segment in news and current affairs programs and precede the program in other cases.⁴⁰

The ABC and SBS television networks' Code of Practice have similar guidelines and all television networks appear to abide by those guidelines. In correspondence with the Committee, FACTS stressed that clause 2.6 of its Code of Practice requires that "care is exercised in the selection and broadcast of all material" and argued that the ABA "has not been called upon to investigate a complaint about violent footage in a news or current affairs program".⁴¹ Nevertheless, representations

39 Australian Broadcasting Authority, 'Cool' or 'gross', *Children's attitudes to violence, kissing and swearing on television*, Sydney 1994, p. x, p.46 and 22

40 Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS), *Commercial Television Industry Code of Practice and other Regulatory and Self-Regulatory documents*, Aug. 1993, para.2.25.

41 Letter to Committee Chairman from Mr Tony Branigan, General Manager of FACTS, 28 January 1997

made to the Committee of Ministers and to the Senate Committee on the level of violence portrayed in news and current affairs programs show that this issue remains a major concern.

Some would argue that the news deal with facts and as such must be reported as they happened. However, news editors often show a tendency to focus on the sensational and use those images that are most likely to shock. The ABA's surveys indicate that this effect is achieved. The time-slot at which news programs are shown may explain the high level of concern reported in the surveys. Not only are most children watching at that time (92 per cent of children in the ABA survey said that they did) but many would identify with the Grade 3/4 boy from Coffs Harbour who was reported in the survey as saying:

We usually get our tea when the news is on and therefore I don't like watching it when all the blood and guts and that sort of stuff is on when you are eating.⁴²

The Senate Committee is not calling for the news to be censored here. Violent events can be adequately reported without accompanying the report with distressing images. One possible way of dealing with this problem may be to report the news item but to avoid using graphic footage to accompany it during the early evening news bulletin. Footage depicting more graphic violence could be used to accompany later evening news.

The Committee recommends:

That when reporting news items which are identified by the television stations themselves as being accompanied by "disturbing footage", that footage should only be shown in later evening news bulletins and not during the early evening news bulletins when large numbers of children are watching television.

(Recommendation 13)

42 Australian Broadcasting Authority, 'Cool' or 'gross', *Children's attitudes to violence, kissing and swearing on television*, Sydney 1994, p.26

OTHER MATTERS

Music Lyrics

Violent and anti-social messages in music lyrics was raised in a number of submissions and this concern was echoed at the Senate Committee's seminar. In response to community concerns on this issue, Australia's censorship ministers agreed on 25 October 1996 to a proposal from the Australian Record Industry Association (ARIA) for a 12 month trial of voluntary warnings about explicit lyrics on retail CD covers. Of more direct relevance to this inquiry, the trial industry Code of Practice requires members of the industry to refuse distribution and sale of records with lyrics which encourage extreme violence or crime. The Ministers responsible have warned that a compulsory censorship scheme would be considered if the trial self-regulation fails.

Concerns in relation to music lyrics centred around the difficulty for parents to monitor what children are listening to on the radio since so much listening is done with headphones. The repetitive nature of many popular lyrics also leads to a fear that a depressed adolescent may succumb to negative messages (such as lyrics promoting suicide as a means of resolving personal problems). Violent acts, whether directed towards the self as in suicides or towards others in mass shootings tend to engender a 'copycat' element. There have been reports that people contemplating suicide may be particularly vulnerable to 'copying' other suicides.⁴³ It is therefore important to control material that encourages violent acts against the self. The Senate Committee would like to see specific mention made of suicide in the ARIA Code of Practice's Guidelines for *Material which exceeds the upper parameters of 18+*

The Committee recommends:

That the ARIA Code of Practice Guidelines No. 3 for "material which are not permitted to be sold" be amended to add the word "suicide" after the words "incest" and "child abuse". (Recommendation 14)

43 Cantor, C. H. & Sheehan, P. Violence and Media Reports - A Connection with Hungerford? Archives of Suicide Research, Griffith University.

Computer Games and Internet Access

Song lyrics are not the only media through which the virtues of suicide and other violent acts are extolled. Easy access to information on the Internet on how to commit suicide was another area of concern revealed in submissions to this inquiry.⁴⁴ The issue of children gaining Internet access to a whole range of information (including depictions of violence) that is not controlled by any responsible adult is a continuing concern to many parents.

The Senate Committee's seminar was told by the Australian Broadcasting Authority's representative that a new package has been developed to address this problem: Platform for Internet Content Selection (PICS). The manager of on-line services at the ABA explained to the Committee that PICS "enables Internet content to be labelled and it also allows PICS compatible software to respond to those labels".⁴⁵ Parents can set their software at home in such a way that it blocks out material which is labelled violence, strong language or sex. Parents and teachers can also choose what level of violence (or strong language or sex) they will allow through. The Senate Committee was told that the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC) in the United States have made the labels they have developed for on-line services freely available on the Internet. In addition, an international advisory council is being formed to enable other countries, such as Australia and Britain to have an input into the RSAC when it is making decisions on how material should be classified (labelled).

Seminar participants expressed some scepticism as to whether PICS would in fact give parents and teachers effective control of access to material on the Internet. The ABA's representatives were very positive in their assessment of the new package.

The Senate Committee welcomes any development aimed at protecting children from material unsuitable for their age group or deemed inappropriate by those responsible for them. The Committee is aware that constant technological developments in the electronic industry and the pace of change in the availability of on-line services make it difficult for parents and teachers to keep abreast of developments in those areas.

44 Submission Nos 98

45 Hansard, Friday 29 Nov. 1996, p.70 (Ms Koomen)

In its next inquiry, the Committee intends to revisit the issues surrounding the proliferation of on-line services to monitor changes and assess whether community standards have been maintained since it last looked at that rapidly developing area. PICS and the labelling of software may not resolve all the problems parents and teachers face in protecting children from unsuitable material on the Internet but they will go some way towards making the task less formidable.

WHAT ROLE FOR EDUCATION?

As new technologies make more information and entertainment from anywhere in the world accessible from within the home, it is increasingly difficult for governments to use centralised bodies (such as the Office of Classification) to effectively prevent access to certain type of portrayals deemed offensive or unsuitable for a particular age group or for the community in general. It is becoming imperative that the viewers themselves be educated to make informed choices about the images they choose to watch or interact with. The task of controlling information and entertainment of children at home is falling largely to parents.

The Committee of Ministers recognised the need for "regular public and school education campaigns" on the subject of violence in the electronic media. A large percentage of submissions also pointed to this need. The most popular call was for an intensive public education campaign through the electronic media itself, modelled on past successes such as the *Life Be In It* and the anti-smoking campaigns. The campaign's main focus would be to warn parents that repeated exposure to high level violence through television, videos and videogames and other electronic means could have an adverse effect on their child's attitudes and behaviour.

The Senate Committee also believes that public education campaigns are needed and that the electronic media are one means through which the public can be informed. However, if it is to be effective, a public education campaign will need to use various approaches, target many different groups in the community and operate at many levels:

- School media studies must equip young viewers to make informed choices about the programs that are available to them through television, videos, games and the Internet.
- continuing on-air campaigns aimed at parents and teachers to help them remain familiar with classification symbols and the on-screen advice about programs.
- media campaigns to make parents and teachers aware of the latest control tools available to them (such as the V-chip and PICS) and to encourage them to become conversant with how those controls operate.

The Committee recommends:

That State and Territory education ministers take steps to encourage schools to offer a compulsory course on a critical evaluation of the media at some stage during the latter primary school years.

(Rec 15)

and

That the federal government fund a public education campaign through the media to make parents and teachers aware of the means (such as the classification symbols, the V-chip as it becomes available and PICS labelling on the Internet) available to them to control material that their children watch and play with. The campaign should include information on how to find out more about how those control systems operate.

(Recommendation 16)

Educating specific groups

The Committee of Ministers has recommended that specific research " be undertaken to identify groups most at risk from the portrayal of violence, analyse reasons why these groups are at risk and identify possible solutions".⁴⁶ This work will be under the responsibility of the Minister for Health and Family Services.

The Senate Committee endorses this recommendation and awaits the results of the research. In the meantime, it sees a need for continuing support for programs for people identified as being at risk of violent behaviour.

This group, consisting of people who have engaged in violent behaviour or are assessed by health or other community workers to be at risk of engaging in such behaviour, heads the list of those requiring help and education. As already mentioned, that group is identified in the research findings as being the group more likely to watch violent movies. One approach is to raise their awareness of the devastating consequences of their own violent behaviour and of the possible role of violent images in reinforcing that behaviour and desensitising them. A number of

46 Report of the Committee of Ministers on the Portrayal of Violence, p. 11

organisations work with people identified as being at-risk of violent behaviour, concentrating on behaviour change and conflict resolution programs. One such program, the Men's Shed Project in Gippsland, Victoria, took the following initiative in response to the need it saw:

One of the things we did last year was start a program for kids in schools called the COOL project, which means control of one's life. That came out of a request from violent men in the program who said, 'Why could we not have had something when we were younger? Why do we have to wait until we are 30 or 40 to learn how not to be violent?'⁴⁷

Men's Shed Project is not the only group extending to schools. Melbourne University's *International Conflict Resolution Centre* is involved in a number of joint programs, in partnership with education departments in Victoria and Tasmania aimed at promoting a climate of non-violence in schools. The Centre is involved in training teachers to address the issue of violence in schools. It assists with developing curriculum material for use in violence reduction programs and it also conducts research among children to find out how they apply the conflict resolution skills they have learnt in the programs. *Enough is Enough* is an organisation that goes out to schools mainly in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory and has similar aims to the programs mentioned above. The "BIG hART" projects in Tasmania targets released young offenders and young people identified as being "at-risk" of engaging in violence because of being disconnected from the community.⁴⁸

The Senate Committee urges governments at all levels to continue support for such programs both in the community and in schools since they offer people who show aggressive tendencies opportunities to learn non-violent ways of coping. To the community such programs offer some hope of reducing instances of violence occurring.

47 Hansard, Friday 29 Nov. 1996, p.47 (Mr Laming)

48 Submissions Nos 155, 131 and 96051204

The Committee recommends:

That the federal and state governments increase, through the relevant departments, funding currently available to organisations that run conflict resolution programs and other programs designed to promote a culture of non-violence in the community.

(Recommendation 17)

The Senate Committee has already referred to the issue of educating media professionals responsible for film production, television programming and computer and video game production by keeping them informed of research findings such as the one referred to at the seminar by the Director of the OFLC. That research, done at the University of California had revealed the tendency for film makers to portray violence without also showing its consequences. Violence was not being portrayed in context although research indicated that context is very important in determining the impact of violent images. The Committee was told that the Communications Law Centre has recently developed a computer program for journalists "looking at the ethics of various practices in the electronic media...there is a very heavy demand from the mainstream media organisations to book journalists into these courses" ⁴⁹ The Committee welcomes such developments as they can assist those responsible for creating electronic media images to be more responsive to community and individual needs when reporting the effects of violence.

The Senate Committee is aware however, that the overwhelming majority of violent films available in Australia do not originate here but are imported from overseas. There is a need for the management of television stations to recognise that the community remains extremely concerned at the amount of violence shown on television (possibly, as has been said before, because television brings the violent images into the comfort zone of their own homes) and that it has a right to expect more responsible programming from its sources of information and entertainment in the electronic media. The Committee believes that the Australian Broadcasting Authority should investigate the possibility of imposing a limit on the amount of violence shown by television

49 Hansard, Friday 29 Nov. 1996, p.83 (Mr Grant)

networks as an "additional condition" of holding a commercial broadcasting licence, under section 43 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*.

The amount and level of violence portrayed by any television station could be monitored through the ABA *Hotline* recommended by the Committee earlier in this report. Any network identified as showing violent programs repeatedly would be required to explain to the ABA why it is showing a high level of violent programs in the face of continuing community concern over the issue.

The Committee recommends:

That the Australian Broadcasting Authority review the number of viewer complaints about the amount and levels of violence shown by a television network in order to:

- (a) highlight those television networks showing the most violence**
- (b) encourage a reduction in violent programming by linking it to the commercial television licence renewing process.**

(Recommendation 18)

CONCLUSION

The task of the Senate Committee was to inquire into the portrayal of violence in the electronic media and matters arising from the submissions made to the Committee of Ministers on that issue. The Committee has therefore dealt with the issue of violence from the standpoint of how it is portrayed in the media and how that portrayal is perceived in the community (as revealed by written and oral submissions to the Committee). The submissions call for governments to apply greater control and for those involved in the production and programming aspects of the electronic media industry to act in a responsible way towards the viewing community they wish to attract.

The need for continuing education and co-operation between all the groups involved is becoming more widely recognised. There is a need for audiences generally to become more discriminatory in the information and entertainment that they watch. Schools need to teach children and adolescents to critically evaluate what they watch and the electronic games they play with. At the other end of the creative spectrum, some believe that the creators of movies and programs have to be told of the possible negative effects of the images they create. The latest research seems to indicate that those creators are not aware of their tendency to portray violence without also portraying its ugly consequences nor do they seem aware of the long term effects that this approach seems to have on their young audience. Finally, there is a need to educate those who are identified as being aggressive and who may, as the research indicate have a liking for watching violent images. They may need help to cope with aggressive feelings after exposure to violent material so that they do not see aggressive behaviour as the only possible response.

The Committee is well aware that violence in society existed before the advent of the electronic media and it has repeatedly stated throughout this report, that the issue is one of great complexity. The need for storytelling is universal and it is to the electronic media that today's generation turns for its stories. The Committee recognises that the community needs "true stories" and "dark stories"⁵⁰ as well as happy

50 Note: Joseph Cambell, in a book about the place of story telling in society discusses the need for "dark stories". *The Hero of a Thousand Faces*, London, Paladin 1988.

tales. Violence is often part of the former and must be portrayed. The evidence before the Committee suggests, however that the community questions the graphic way in which the violence is conveyed and the frequency with which the electronic media offers violent portrayals for consumption. It expects government action on this issue but it also expects professionals in the electronic media industry to assume responsibility for reducing the volume of anti-social messages conveyed in programs and films.

As technological advances make more electronic images and information easily available, the problem of reducing exposure to violent portrayal becomes so complex that it can only be dealt with by a concerted effort at international, federal and state government levels. The need for international cooperation on some aspects of this issue has recently been recognised by the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation and the Committee welcomes the announcement on 21 January 1997 that UNESCO has invited the ABA to conduct a pilot study (as a preliminary to what might become a wider project) on the possibility of international regulation of the Internet.

The Committee urges the electronic media industry to co-operate with governments and organisations both within Australia and overseas to achieve a reduction in the volume and levels of violent images that can be received in homes and schools around the country. The result may be a safer and more peaceful environment for all.